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A moving dispassionate which is un- surprisingly sincerity  
 author's experiences as a young novice in  
 the convent of the Mystic Rose in the Swiss  
 mountains. After suffering two years of  
 hardship and unhygienic conditions, the  
 young nun came to realize that she had  
 mistaken her vocation and returned to the  
 world. In her telling, the book becomes  
 also a commentary, interwoven with wisdom,  
 tragedy, and humor, on hopes and fears that  
 stir human beings both within and without  
 monastic life.

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THESE ARE BORZOI BOOKS

*Published by Alfred · A · Knopf*



*THE CONVENT*



# THE Convent



CALYSE SIMPSON

*Alfred A. Knopf*



NEW YORK 1940

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*“It is not  
any enmity to religion  
that speaks,  
but my memory of  
much suffering”*





*THE CONVENT*



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EVENING came at last and darkness. We switched on the light, but John did not come. Others came, Houseman the schoolmaster and old Doctor Flynn. They were discussing Shakespeare at first and a little later the depressing state of Europe, the inevitability of further wars, the complete collapse of the financial system, and the world in the abstract. Then there was Webb the painter, the cynic who had discussed love, mortal love, while the rain had been steadily pad-padding on the window-pane. Eventually my father suggested a game of cards, and my mother rose from her chair to draw the blinds.

I knew then that John would never come, and it

was then that I decided to renounce the world. And when I awoke at dawn I was still of the same opinion. I wanted to become a nun. It seemed the only rational thing to do. Nothing persisted, Webb had said, and Houseman had agreed, so had Flynn and so had my father. They knew, for they were old. I felt very quiet and at peace now I had decided, and as I lay in my bed and closed my eyes I could see shaded cloisters, young women walking in them in twos, their faces beautiful and placid, all their trials over and their lives one long full dream.

TO MY father and mother that morning in October was a morning like any other. For years each day had been like any other day to them. The scene was care-free, it was peaceful, the breakfast table laid with a bright blue cloth, the early sun reflecting on the coffee-pot. Flamboyant beds of geraniums, the last of the summer, were beckoning in the garden. It was all as it had been for years, and it seemed a pity to shock my parents with what I was about to tell them; what I had been trying to tell them for several days. My father was reading the paper over by the window.

"Father," I said, trembling a little, "I must tell you something. . . . I must tell you now. I am going away."

"Eh?" he shouted, putting down the paper.

"I am going away, father . . . I've decided to become a nun." My father did not say a word.

"I knew you would not like it, father," I nervously resumed.

"God!" was all he said as he folded up the paper. "God!"

Then the doorway darkened as my mother entered from the garden, and a shadow fell across the table. "What a lovely morning," she said brightly, "glory be to God."

Then in a flash I foresaw the coming years for them and the aspect seemed a little melancholy.

"She is going to leave us," my father said quite simply.

"To leave us? . . . Wherever for?" my mother said, still brightly.

"To the convent of the Mystic Rose at Benwyl," I quickly added. "You see, mother, I want to be a nun, to renounce the world . . . you see, I must . . . I can't help it."

"You don't mean it . . . you can't mean it," my mother repeated again and again. "You can't mean it."

"Please don't cry. I knew you would not understand but I've got to do it. I shall be very happy there I know it."

Then as we toyed with our food none of us spoke. My mother was continually wiping her eyes. Others had gone from our home town, she was thinking, to become nuns and monks and missionaries, and as far as one knew they were happy. But suppose they were not? Suppose they had mistaken their vocation?

"I shall be so happy," I comforted my parents once more. "You see, I'll be doing God's will, too . . . I am sure."

They looked away from me. We had never spoken in our home of religion. The generation that had been taught to pray at its mothers' knees had already passed. It was not that my father and mother did not know the meaning of sacrifice or renunciation. They knew far more than I, of course, but they never spoke as I did now of "sacrifice for the love of Christ."

It was a sultry morning, with a suggestion of thunder in the air. I saw my father walk across the room, draw the curtains aside, and look out into the garden, to the flowering chrysanthemums. He looked older from the back as men often do, and his hair was getting very grey. My mother too sat quite motionless, saying nothing, her hands folded in her lap. They were both grow-

ing old and I was going to leave them for ever, and this was the house and the garden they had built for me, and the place in which I was born—I, their only child; and these were the worldly possessions I was now going to renounce.

“Aren’t you,” said my father slowly, “staking everything on your trust?”

“Of course I am,” I said brightly, “that’s what I mean to do, take things on trust.”

Then my father turned his back again, let down the dark green blinds against the sun just as on any other sunny day, keeping out the light so that the carpets, the upholstery should not fade unduly. I had often wondered why he minded that, considering how short life really was. That was what possessions meant, taking care of belongings, keeping house, rearing children, making jam, talking trivialities. I thought of my girl friends, married already, some of them, all a little dull, all of them preoccupied with money, babies, and how best to keep their husbands’ love.

“But to be a nun of all things,” my mother said at last, crying again.

“Yes, why?” shouted my father, angrily now. “D’you realize the life those women have, stuck in the same place, cooped up for ever, doing penance for their sins or someone else’s sins. Bah! . . . weeping and moan-



ing in sanctity . . . until they go mad. Crucified!"

"Stop, please," I cried, and then not knowing what to say I ran upstairs.

In my room I seated myself on my bed wondering what to do. The day that had started just like any other day had turned to gloom, and soon its earlier loveliness changed and the sky grew overcast. I drew my box from beneath my bed and began sorting out my clothes and my letters. Most of the letters I burnt on the hearth, half hoping that my mother would come up so that I could explain to her that I wanted a purpose, a real purpose in life, to which I could give myself up, my youth and all my gaiety. But mother did not come. And then for a little while I thought of John. John was often on my mind. He had promised to come for me within the year, if he could, but the year was over now and I had not heard from him again.

And then again I saw myself walking on consecrated ground, strolling leisurely up and down the cloisters of the convent of the Mystic Rose reciting the rosary, and I imagined I heard women's voices rising from a walled-in garden, a garden filled with pale white lilies; singing, singing, *Ave, ave Maria*, thus completely and for ever ravishing the listener. I was tremendously romantic. But, like all romantic people, I was also a realist at time, and the realist that was in me, that is in

all women, was asking, Is it not all an illusion?

Perhaps, another part of me replied, but illusions were known to have frequently lasted a lifetime. So here I sat, a girl not yet twenty, ready to leave the world. Mind you, it was not, as Uncle Daniel thought when I told him, an escape from life, although, to be sure, the world as it was had not come up to my expectation. No, it was not that. My renunciation was to be a kind of martyrdom, exquisite in a way, awe-inspiring even. The trouble was I had always wanted to do something really big.

The day passed somehow. My parents kept quiet. I did not like being indoors too much, for it was more than I could bear to see my faintly reproachful mother suffer so. She did not know that I was to leave her in two days' time, and I could sense that she hoped I might yet change my mind.

Then in the evening Uncle Daniel came, and made a fuss. He was not really my uncle, just an old friend of the family who had no children of his own, and was some day going to leave me all his money. He was not going to do it now, of course. No money of his, he said, would ever "enrich the coffers of a nunnery; no, not while he was in possession of all his faculties." It was no use telling my uncle Dan that there have been many dreams, beautiful dreams dreamt by individuals as

well as communities all through history, and that it was not fair, or just, or tactful to scoff at them. I did remind him, though, that young people often did have dreams, a fact he had probably long forgotten, and had it not been for dreams no one would have discovered anything worth while in the world.

"Ah, yes," he said, "and what has it brought them to, most of them? Martyrdom."

"Exactly," I said with enthusiasm. "That's what I want." He took no notice of that.

"Besides," he went on, "there is nothing that I can see for you to find in a convent, a girl like you, not exactly ugly, not untalented and not penniless. I know all about convent life," he added knowingly.

Of course, that was not true . . . he knew nothing at all about religious fervour or any cloistered life.

"A few years ago," he then reminded me, "you were stage-struck . . . and when we put a stop to that you turned down Marti, the finest fellow that ever was, and wanted to get engaged to that foreigner, that Englishman. And that's not come to anything, has it?"

It was no use arguing with Uncle Daniel at all.

"Well, I am growing older," I said, "and I want to do something that has some meaning . . . and what's more, you can't stop me."

"Meaning?" he sneered. "Tell me, what's the mean-

ing of a life like that! A nunnery! . . . Relics of the past, that's what they are. *Sacre Dieu*," he went on quite angrily, "isn't there anything left in the world to attract you?"

"Oh, don't talk to me of the world," I said, feeling angry, too. "What of materialism and war and hunger, misunderstanding . . . and the perfectly useless martyrdom of mothers?"

Uncle Dan just stood and stared at me, and then suddenly he went out and slammed the door.

I never saw Uncle Daniel again. I forgave him though. He was an old man, approaching seventy; an age at which I reckoned a man might be said to have one foot in the grave. Up till now he seemed to have got on remarkably well without religion, but the time would surely come when he would repent. I decided to remember him at prayers. He would have been angry, though, I mused, if he had known.

I had received some very cordial letters from Sister Maria Adelheid, the Mother Superior of the convent of the Mystic Rose, which lay in the heart of the most beautiful country. I was delighted that now everything was arranged and I went about feeling tremendously exalted. During the afternoon I went out to discuss the matter with Uncle Oscar, a bachelor who was a retired professor, and an expert in Oriental philosophy who

advocated the ideals of the Yogi cult and was said to indulge in periodical bouts of fasting, meditating, and walking by himself. He, too, was said to have kept singularly free of all contamination by the fairer sex. And, too, saw nothing but violence and anarchy in the outside world.

"What's that?" he asked, as I told him that I was going to leave the common world, to enter into seclusion, and that I had made up my mind to be, if not a saint, at least a saintly woman, that something about the nuns had always attracted me tremendously and that I longed to be one of them.

His opinion about nuns and renunciation to my great delight coincided with my own, although he could not hide his surprise at so young a woman displaying so curious an ambition, an ambition he himself had only lately come by. But no one took Uncle Oscar seriously. He was considered to be a crank and his opinion valueless.

THEN late at night, shortly before midnight, my father came to my room and for a moment stood by the door not knowing what to say.

"Forgive me, dear," he started, "maybe I am getting old, maybe I fail to understand, but I have been thinking that it is all wrong and against human nature to—to renounce this world."

And as there was no answer he gave it up and softly closed the door behind him.

Sobbing, I turned my face to the wall. My martyrdom, my unworldly ambition, I slowly realized, not without satisfaction though, had already begun. I awakened later as a thunderstorm crashed through the valley and echoed in the mountains. The last leaves of the lime tree by my window shuddered as if in anticipation as the first big drops of rain began to fall. A sudden gust tore at the shutters, and I heard father talking in the room next door comforting my mother who was still thinking about me. When I awoke again it was light. Two more days only in the outside world! The River Aare, which passed our house, was a leaden grey. The little town of Hapsberg, my native town, lay in the shadow of two gigantic mountains which sometimes threatened, overpowered, or inspired the people in the valley according to their moods. They were said to have some power or other which affected those living beneath them, and filled them with the most haunting nostalgia if ever they were away from home. Yet strangely enough, the youth of the district was irre-

sistibly called or lured away into distant countries. Some had gone as far as Brazil, where they had founded a little colony. Others had been foolishly attracted by places with romantic names, places like Peru, Valparaiso, and Bangkok. A few were working in the back streets of Paris and London and could but rarely spare the money to come home again, however much they wanted to.

Some of these "children of the alps" became "religious," and as it was a Catholic county and a Catholic town, instead of becoming missionaries in India or the Philippines they went into the local nunneries.

As I was dressing, the priest of the little town, the Rev. Father Schmitt, walked up the granite steps to the church, his cassock beating emptily round his ugly boots. Hundreds of swallows were still circling chaotically above the houses and the tower. They, too, like me, would now soon be gone. So I hurried into my coat, and crossed the road to early mass. I should be going to early mass daily now, for ever. That was definite, the most definite thing there was, once I was inside the convent. A few children were praying in the almost empty church, having stopped there on their way to school; and a few peasant women, who, having dropped in on their way to the vineyards, were kneeling in front of me, murmuring audibly to themselves.

"She is going to be a nun . . . have you heard? . . . She is going to be a nun," I heard them whispering behind me as I hurried home to breakfast. It was as if they were saying something terrible, like "She is going to prison," or "She is going to die."

And as I reached home I found my mother sitting by the table doing nothing, saying nothing, eating nothing. It did not seem as though I could take leave of my parents with that indifference to the things of the world I was now cultivating. She knew I was to leave them soon, in two days' time. She loved me. How she loved me I did not know and there was a look of abdication on her face which I could not easily forget. We had grown silent and ill at ease and shy with each other. These were the most unhappy hours of our lives. After breakfast my mother helped me to pack away the things I should now never want again. I shall always remember that morning as we were working together rather despondently, while the hammering from the distant smithy travelled in long-drawn waves across the market-place.

And, by and by, as I was cleaning out the drawers in my room my mother made another effort to persuade me to stay at home with her.

"You have not had a bad time?" she pleaded, and when I said, "Of course not," she added that if one had



work to occupy one there was meaning enough in life, and there was no need to leave the world. She said that it was a mistake to overlook reality and live a life of fancy and imagination. For that was what a religious life was, and she knew how it resulted in misery in the end. By then, my little room was clean and tidy and all my belongings folded away and fresh papers in my drawers. My mother went down to help my father prune the red currant bushes in the vegetable garden. After lunch my Uncle Oscar called again. He was not very well received. I took him up into my room and once more I told him how I was looking forward to my new ascetic life, and it pleased me that his enthusiasm was as great as mine. Almost better; it seemed to be bordering on pure delight. He was indeed the best friend I had in these difficult hours, and he said again and again how it was quite evident that I was sure to be a great saint some day, and become an abbess or something, and that my decision showed uncommon wisdom and intelligence, and that he had always thought I was unlike the average run of girls, and far removed from the coarse, materialistic herd who merely worshipped mammon.

He was very scornful, too, of the modern world, and after he had gone I was full of this far-from-the-world

feeling and fresh determination. I was moved to shout almost. I was certain now that there was something about a cloistral life that would stir me ever anew and that would give all things still more meaning. And then, after supper, as the church bells rang for benediction I ran across . . . and as I knelt in church my heart grew tense with adoration. To think that of all these beating hearts of the five thousand immortal souls in Hapsberg, I alone was chosen on this day. It was inexpressibly exalting. Before me hung a wooden Christ cunningly floodlit by a hidden lamp, wearily holding out His arms, His sorrowful head looking down on me as though I alone had heard His call. I wanted to be worthy. It struck me that possibly I was in need of more humility, I was feeling far too proud of being one of the elect.

The Himmelsberg was steeped in moonlight now, and I decided to walk up to the wayside shrine beyond the second bridge. I was feeling pleasantly heroic when I heard footsteps behind me. The path was very narrow, and there was a drop of thirty feet on one side and a wall, dark and sheer, towering on the other. Making room for the approaching man, who was carrying a lantern, I pressed my body tightly to the wall. I knew him as soon as he came nearer. It was Marti, the son of Doc-

tor Flynn, my father's friend—Marti, who had proposed to me a year ago and who had been angry with me since.

"It's a lovely night," he said loudly, and then as he recognized me he stopped, placed his lantern at his feet, and wanted to know "what the devil" I was doing up there at that hour of the night. He, being the youngest doctor of the local hospital, was sent to do the more arduous sick-visiting, and was now on his way up to the alp where the cowherd lay dying.

"Look here," he said, taking hold of my wrist, "is there any truth in what I hear, that you are going to be a nun? Is there? Is there?" he repeated almost threateningly.

"Yes," I said quite calmly, "there is."

"Christ!" he shouted, so that it echoed from the rocks. "Whatever for?"

"Well," I shouted a little myself, "what do you expect? It's an ideal, isn't it?"

"It certainly is that," he added after a pause. And then, as he tried to pass me he seemed quite suddenly to remember something, turned towards me, pushed me still closer to the wall, and kissed my face. "Here is something to remember," he said eventually, "you blasted little virgin." The moon revealed my face as he released me. "Surely," he said quite soberly, "you

are not frightened of me? . . . but that's what you really want, you know, only you would not believe it, someone to rouse you . . . you . . . you madonna-face."

Then Marti disappeared into the dark among the fir trees and I turned homewards with my thoughts, intending to go to my room to write some farewell letters to my absent friends, almost the last letters I should ever be writing in my life, for there would be no writing of letters once I was "inside." I was going to write to John, to tell him that I was renouncing the world. I wondered, as I thought of him, how he would take the news. He would not be able to understand, any more than Marti did. I wondered, too, why he had not come back as he said he would, and why he had not written. In a way, it had made it much easier for me to say good-bye to everything.

It was the beginning of October and the people of Hapsberg had been harvesting their grapes and had been making sweet new wine. The taverns were crowded and alcoholic voices floated from their open windows. The proprietress of the "Red Bull" stood outside on the doorstep giving a final embrace to one of her male guests. Prolonged farewells in the shadow of the street lamp were given to old men and young men with equal intensity by this never-ageing widow.

I had seen her do that many years ago. There was a sameness in this scene as there was in the recurring seasons of harvesting. It used to shock me deeply. It did not now. Something had already changed inside me and suddenly all was different. I was getting tolerant, the same as saints were—tolerant and forgiving.

As I was walking past the post office, the church, and the vicarage there was a different scene. The Rev. Father Schmitt was still working in his study; no, he was praying, for his lips were moving, and in his hands he held a book. Perhaps he, too, was doing penance for the sins of the world, the same as I should soon be doing.

"Ah," someone suddenly said behind me, "and here is our future nun!"

It was Webb the artist who was returning from a party, a little drunk, I thought. "Going to live in another world soon?" he wanted to know . . . "and you'll have no regrets, you think?"

"No," I said simply, "what is there to regret?"

"Ah, but you'll be poor, remember . . . and you'll have desires . . . but you'll also have your dope, of course," he went on, as I did not answer him. "Yes," he seemed to muse, "with some it's love"; and then he pointed to the "Red Bull," "and with some it's wine. . . . Your Uncle Oscar, as far as I can judge, gets his

from the library . . . and you . . . you'll get it straight from God . . . ha! . . . ha! . . . ha!"

So saying he walked away.

Even the purple autumn crocus was faintly visible now against the moonlit meadow, but I could not forget what Webb had said about dope, wine, love; and I thought of Marti and his surprising kisses, and then I thought of John, a little sadly, it is true, and how in future I should not be allowed to dwell on any of them; but I knew that I should never quite forget and that I should always remember this last night, the roofs of Hapsberg pressing round the church, the moonlit river winding under her bridges, and the old priest sitting by himself, the priest who had arranged it all for me and had used his influence to get me accepted in this well-known nunnery. And then the drunks going home to their women, to other women; it was all the same to them, they said, when in drink.

The priest turned out the light and suddenly a shooting star bridged the gulf between the mountain tops and then the innkeeper loudly locked her doors, and the church clock struck two. Though dawn was still far away, the Capuchin monks at the nearby monastery turned on their lights and started their day. Cadaverous-looking men, most of them, all of them ascetics, they rose from their cots to work and pray, to

silence and to subjugation. Their hooded shadows flitted, ghost-like, past their window-blinds. That would be my kind of life now, forever. I, too, would be an ascetic, with God's help. Then suddenly a tiny speck of light descended from the Himmelsberg earthwards, zigzagging this way and that way like a drunken star. It was Marti's lantern. Now the moon had gone behind the mountain, and inky darkness drove me inside at last to the warmth of my room. I drew the curtains and went to sleep for the last time in the home of my youth.

THEN came the day. Every one was weeping, including May, the maid. I knew, we all knew, that probably we should see each other once more only in this life, on the day of my "profession" when I should take the veil, in three years' time. The sun was shining as on any other day. It was the 7th of October, and I was leaving this world and I was not yet twenty! Why, I asked myself as we parted by the garden gate, did I inflict such sadness on my parents as well as on myself? I did not know. I had to; that was all. One could not refuse the call. It was a priceless gift. Reason told me, too, that

my parents were getting old and that the time would come when they would leave me. I saw my mother's ageing hands as they rested on the garden gate and then, as I looked up in her eyes, I felt as though I were the older of the two. I turned and quickly walked away. There were tears in my father's eyes. I have never forgotten those tears. I started to run down to the little station, my bag in my hand; now it was all I possessed. I hoped I should meet no one; but as I passed the bank and the post office some of the clerks peered out of the windows, and I imagined that I heard them jeer at me. A few other people I knew turned round to watch me go, for everybody had by now heard of my decision. That made me feel uncharitable. There seemed no privacy in so small a town and more than ever I longed to be off, out of everybody's sight, and I felt more than ever pleased at renouncing so small, so gossipy a world . . . a world of bank clerks and shop assistants. Then the train drew in, a few people stepped out, and I quickly took my place in a carriage at the back. After some manœuvring it rolled out at last from the old familiar station, past the stucco houses, the shops, the electric power station, and the hospital. I fancied I saw Marti standing by an open window of the hospital, but I was not sure. Every one would soon forget me now, I thought. I was even now



passing out of their lives for ever and people were, alas, so soon forgotten. Yet I did not really want to be forgotten, which was queer, considering.

Any one travelling in that second-class carriage on that fateful morning would have seen a young girl dressed in sober grey without a hat, tears running down her face, a heavy suit-case by her side containing all her belongings. But there was no one there except myself. The little train rumbled on through the outskirts of Hapsberg, over its winding lanes. It struck me that this was the last time in my life that I should sit inside a train; the last time that I should see lovers lying in the fields and embracing, and the last time that I should see the world roll by. I felt both exultant and very sad, and my heart seemed to be beating faster than before. Presently I opened my suit-case, which was filled with all my earthly needs: four regulation night-gowns, high in the neck and long in the sleeves; regulation underclothes which I had bought at the emporium where such outlandish things were stocked. There was a tooth-brush, too, and a prayer book given me by my Uncle Daniel for my first communion, my birth certificate, a new diary, and a fountain pen. Inside the diary were some photographs, my mother's, my father's, and a snapshot of John.

IT WAS already afternoon, and being October it grew dark early. No one had shared the carriage with me at any time on my way to Benwyl, so being young I began to take an interest in life and felt that I was getting hungry. My mother had packed a parcel of food for me, a dainty little parcel, which once more brought the tears to my eyes. There were some ham sandwiches and some chocolate, too. There would be no more chocolate for me in future and probably no more ham.

I was not really due at the convent until the following morning at ten o'clock. That was the proper hour to arrive. It was the rule. So I should have to spend another night outside, at an inn just beyond the convent wall. I had been told that most would-be nuns spent their first night there. Many, it was well known, came from far, and some from distant countries. Staring at the passing landscape until it was quite dark I grew a little sick at heart and a little sick for home; yet all the time I felt queerly happy too and quite excited, too excited to eat all my food. So I sat reflecting about many things, love, for instance, remembering Marti and his kisses on the night before, and thought how all the love that was in me was now to be devoted to

Christ alone. That gave me strength and comfort.

The train, which was a slow one, arrived noisily at the tiny station of Benwyl. It was not really a proper station at all. The train seemed to pull up on the roadside opposite the stationmaster's office and a draper's shop. There was a bookstall there, however, filled with books in worldly covers and innumerable magazines meant to attract the tourists who sometimes came this way. There was one called *La Vie parisienne* and another one, *Die Jugend*. This, too, was now forbidden fruit for me. No more books in future except prayer books and the lives of saints.

At first I thought I was the only passenger descending from the little train, but as I looked back I saw four more people behind me also carrying cases. Passing under a street lamp I clearly saw their faces. Two of the women were young, one of them apparently very beautiful; another, the third woman, was old, and looked tired and drawn; and the fourth was a man, tall and military-looking.

I felt tremendously excited now and unaccountably weak, and for a while I rested, leaning against the wall of the local post office, which was still brightly lit up. No one had met me. But then, I was told that no one would be there and that no one ever met the new arrivals. It did not do to spoil a would-be nun. After all,

it was only three miles from Benwyl to the convent of the Mystic Rose, and the inn called "Adam and Eve." Besides, my life of Spartan endurance had now properly begun and filled me with a new kind of thrill. As I marched on again out into the darkness of a country lane I once more remembered my Uncle Dan and the high talk we had had about my leaving the world, how he had accused me of escaping from responsibility. How wrong he was, of course. Every one knew that it was not that. It seemed to me more than ever a brave thing to do as I trudged along in the dark with the heavy case dangling against my legs. Once more I was feeling pleasantly important. To think that Christ had chosen me; for that was what He had done. Father Schmitt had told me so. That was the way Christ did these things, he had said; He separated the chaff from the grain. I did not quite know what he had meant by that but it had sounded good to me. Yet Uncle Daniel had said that it was no better than a prison, and who would want to go to prison voluntarily? No one but a fool. He had said that several times, just to give it emphasis. He had even slammed his fist down on the table as he repeated it. He knew, he added, he saw it clearly, which was more than I did in my silly young years. But then, Uncle Dan could not see my heart, he did not know how intensely I felt about this new life of mine,

about quitting this old world. Not that I did not love the world or life for that matter, but I wanted the best it had to offer, the most ideal. I felt so rich within me that I needed an outlet, and to give up to God every action, every big or small sacrifice, every breath I took. The nunnery, I felt, would be the most complete outlet for all the most powerful emotions and desires any one was capable of. Besides, it would be infinitely beautiful and sweet.

I grew aware as I staggered along in the dark that my case was heavy and that my right arm ached, but I would not change it over to the other hand. It was only a small gesture to show that now I was determined to be indifferent to pain as well as to ordinary discomfort. My mind began to wander, as it does when one walks along in the dark, and again I thought of John, the English boy, and that little scene after the dance between him and Marti when they had very nearly fought. John would be greatly impressed, I hoped, when he received my letter. It was not unpleasant to dwell on that, on just how impressed he would be when he received the news to-morrow morning. I would have to cast him from my mind, once and for all, as I was on the threshold now of a new and holy life, where men and the thoughts of men had no right to exist.

It was getting cooler, and the undulating road was

dark and every now and then I trod into a pool of water. Then out of the shadow of a pine-wood ahead of me, just as the moon was rising I saw four people slowly emerging, the same four people whom I had seen underneath the lamplight earlier on. They, too, it seemed, were making for the convent. It was almost unreal, a handful of shadows in this damp October night heading away from the world like this. There was no sound at all, no echo of footsteps, no voices; only the wind rustling in the trees on my left.

Presently the other figures reached a bend in the road and I could now see them clearly. As I came to the crest of the hill I saw the convent towering above a tiny scattered village. For a little while I stood and rested and put the case down on the ground. There was no hurry really, and this was the first and last time I should ever see the convent looking down above me from the distance. I still had all the night before me; until to-morrow, when the gates would close behind me for ever, and I should leave all the troubles and all the unrest and all the desperate anxieties of the world behind me . . . as well as its joys, of course. Everything, the whole world, would be unbelievably far away, including all those idle afternoons in my garden by the River Aare. It was not a question of distance, of course, it was infinitely more than that. All the days and all

the years would henceforth be alike to me, as alike as the beads on my rosary which was in my pocket now, newly blessed by Father Schmitt. It was a kind of eternity I was entering upon now, the first step up to heaven. There was no telling what beauty long lost to the world, what nameless peace I should not be finding there. Far above to the west loomed an immense mountain range, and above that starry constellations full of prophetic meaning, and presently I crossed a river which flowed and rippled down towards the south, to Italy.

Much sooner than I expected I came to the gates of the "Adam and Eve," a friendly inn standing alone. A bright electric lamp illuminated the shield above the door which portrayed our ancestral parents, just as God had made them, naked. Behind them stood the fateful apple-tree, its branches drooping with the weight of fruit. Within, behind the windows, a blonde barmaid whom someone called by the name of Rosie was laying the table with a stiff white cloth. The tall military-looking man whom I had noticed on the way stood with his back to the room looking out into the now moonlit vastness, while the two young women, probably also destined for the nunnery, were sitting by themselves apparently sunk in meditation. The middle-aged lady sat by herself, turning the leaves of

an illustrated paper, and looked as though she had recently been crying. It was a chilly assembly, except for the barmaid, who was constantly humming to herself.

"Cheer up," she said to me familiarly as she showed me up to my room. "They all feel like that, you know, on the night before."

Until half-way through our dinner no one spoke at all. The girl called Rosie had been serving river-fish, and the tall man, evidently a German, ordered himself a bottle of Swiss wine. Neither of the two young women seemed to be present in their thoughts. It was almost as though they belonged to another world already. I felt glad that I had not brought my parents with me; it was, I thought, in the end much easier so.

The light shone down on Rosie's yellow head and her robust shoulders as she served our food. She alone looked happy, and one almost disliked her for it. A commonplace girl, I reflected, too gay, too easy-going, too animal. She seemed to mock us with her cheerfulness. Before long, though, I mused, we should be happier too, happy in a different way, once this torment of parting and uncertainty was over.

"Well," said the German, after the second glass of wine, to the elderly woman opposite, "we must all hope for the best."

He too, I reflected, was commonplace.



"Yes," the woman said, with a tremendous sigh, "yes, we must."

Her accent, too, was foreign. They were people from afar, it seemed. She was a Pole, and the beautiful girl with the shining black hair was her daughter.

"They will be safe in there, at least," he, the German, remarked a little later, jerking his thumb towards the convent, which lay in complete darkness now.

"Yes, indeed, I hope so," added the mother of the lovely girl, whose name was Stephany. "No one is safe, it seems, these days."

The German looked like a Prussian officer attempting to disguise himself as a loving father. He had a black mustache and pince-nez dangling on a wide black ribbon. Looking across to his daughter, a sweet, patient-looking girl, he said: "Melanie, won't you have a glass of wine, my dear?" She shook her head.

Then he spoke to me: "Tell me, are you, too, destined for the Mystic Rose?"

"So, so," he said, as I nodded my head. "And do you know the place at all?" he wanted to know. "You don't? Ah, well," he repeated, "We must all hope for the best. This," he went on, pointing to his daughter, a tall hefty girl wearing glasses, "is my little girl."

Melanie looked up from her plate and smiled rather

shyly. Then as I told him my name he introduced the other woman:

"This," he said, with a bow, "is Baroness von Wodlitz of Prague, and this is her daughter."

The girl looked up but did not smile. They were sorry, they said, that I could not tell them anything about the convent. As I was local, so to speak, they thought I might. But then, the German added, as he had said to Melanie before, all nunneries were alike . . . besides . . . as long as the novitiate lasted anyone was free to leave if she did not like it. He glanced at his daughter, who smiled to herself at some private thoughts of her own. Presently, as she looked at me I was struck with her beautiful pale eyes, so young, so completely innocent of the world. I felt glad that she would be a novice with me. I was not so sure about the Polish girl, her eyes were dark and uncommunicative. She looked cold and proud and seemed restless, fidgeting, getting up, looking out into the darkness, sitting down again, as though she were pursued or sent to the Mystic Rose against her will or to spite someone. She never relaxed all evening. One felt as though she were joining the sisterhood of nuns from sheer boredom with life. Perhaps she was. Presently the women left the room and I was left alone with the German.

"Do you mind?" he asked, as he lit his cigar. Then he started to talk about his daughter.

"You see . . . Melanie has recently lost her mother . . . more than that even . . . she has lost her home; *die Krise*, you know, the crisis, poor Melanie. She is quite unfitted for life, really, too gentle, you know, too soft, too innocent, really. Barely awake to realities, if you know what I mean. . . . And I think, as things are, she will be a very happy nun. Her mother would have liked it, I think. In fact, I am certain of that."

As I write there comes back into my mind the whole of that night and the way this man talked to me as though I were his equal in age and experience, whereas I was no older than his daughter. I have never been able to understand why that was so.

"Will you please be so kind as to keep an eye on Melanie for me?" he asked as I rose to go to bed.

He stood up stiffly and bowed me out. Promising to do so I ran upstairs and closed the door.

Alone by myself once more I sat on the creaky bed, and for the thousandth time examined my own heart as though I expected it to have changed during the course of the day. From my suit-case I took my thick white flannel night-gown, slipped it over my head, brushed my hair, and then took out my diary. I wanted it to know all that went on in my life henceforth, but

soon I found myself thinking of the Polish girl, Stephany, and wondered what she was doing now and why she was here. . . . She did not seem to me to be the religious type. Was she, perhaps, an exile of some sort? Or was she also, like me, inspired for some unknown reason to renounce the world? Then I could hear Rosie laughing downstairs in the bar.

The sound of the convent bells striking ten was wafted across the river. "What a strange assortment of people under one roof," I wrote in my diary under the dramatic heading: "My last night in the outside world." Then Rosie entered my room to turn the bed down for me. That would be the last time, too, I thought, anyone would ever wait on me again.

She looked at me once or twice as she refilled the pitcher with fresh water and then she asked, as though I were a child: "Writing to your mother?"

"No, this is my diary."

"A diary?" she gurgled, "*mon Dieu!* Soon all your days will be like all your yesterdays! *Aujourd'hui sera comme hier.* Ha, ha! . . . I'd write to my mother if I were you, sure I would, and then I'll post it for you in the morning, early. Wait, I'll get you some newspaper."

So she ran down into the airless smoky gloom of the dining-room, and after a time came running up again.

swinging her hips, her heavy breasts flapping against her belt. I had to admit that she was thoughtful, more thoughtful than I, although she was no saint. But then I told myself that my mind was on other things, and the world, mother and father, brothers and sisters, had to be ruthlessly abandoned once one followed Him.

Rosie leaned against the doorpost evidently wanting to make certain that I would write this letter. What had it to do with her? I asked myself. She was a stranger. She did not move, but stood there folding her fat arms, her red lips parted a little, her eyes full of *joie de vivre*. There was nothing mysterious about Rosie, not as there was about that girl Stephany who never spoke.

"Why are you going there?" she asked, with genuine curiosity, pointing to the convent. "Crossed in love or something?" she smiled, scratching herself under her left breast.

I shook my head.

"Ah," she went on, "I know! You are just scared of life, all of you "

"Oh, no, Miss Rosie," I said "It's not that at all. All I know is that you would not understand."

I picked up the note-paper with "Adam and Eve" printed on it in the right-hand corner and started to

write my letter home. I heard Rosie laughing as she ran downstairs, and soon I heard her playing the concertina in the room below.

As I awoke in the early dawn I was conscious of a kind of panic. From my bed I could see the distant grey walls of the Mystic Rose and I wondered what was really awaiting me there. Rosie soon came in with an early cup of lime-blossom tea, and an intimate smile hovered on her lips. There was something strong and warm and motherly about Rosie.

"It's half-past six," she said solemnly, like a sympathetic jailer speaking to a condemned person. Then she laughed. "I have brought you some boiling water to wash with," she added, fetching in a huge enamel can from the landing and covering it over with a towel.

Then as she left me the bells of the church of the convent, a quarter of a mile away, rang down the fields which were studded with pale purple crocuses. I looked up to the sky and once more began to wonder how it would be behind those beckoning walls; here the open fields and the forests and hills and the moun-

tains beyond and the river below going on and on until it reached the sea—and there those twelve-foot walls which enclosed many acres of garden. It was funny how much more difficult it was to visualize it now I was so near. A whole new world! Within a world! A refuge almost too good to be true, a tiny unknown world which was not marked on any map.

It struck me that I ought to feel more cheerful now, but somehow I felt unaccountably afraid. So I decided to go down to talk to Rosie. The annual arrival of a handful of novices was quite an event at the “Adam and Eve,” and Rosie, a robust country girl, was apparently always tremendously puzzled or even amused in her crude way by these passing guests whom she never after saw again. She said that she knew, of course, that everybody knew, that women these days had to take their places where they could. Ah, but speaking for herself she would much rather stay outside, much rather. There had been an Italian girl named Marietta who passed this way two years ago, Rosie went on as she wiped last night’s wine-glasses, the most staggering beauty she had ever seen, and by the looks of her so delicate, such lovely skin, a girl she had never been able to forget. She often wondered if she was still alive. She thought it was a pity for nice-looking girls like that

grow old in there, either," she added brightly, "not by all accounts. . . . Ah, but take no notice of what I say," she consoled me now, "I am rather ignorant really, and I am not what you might call devout." The Lord, it was quite evident, had not willed her to be religious. Where, she would like to know, would the world be without her type making sure that it did not die out?

With Rosie's gurgling laugh still in my ears, the kind of laughter I was now not likely to hear again, I sat down to breakfast with the rest. And here we were, the three of us, all a little pathetic in retrospect, filled with youthful idealism, inspired to give up our young lives to fasting for Christ's and the world's sake. As the sun rose above the pine-trees we all of us felt much brighter and not a little heroic and not a little proud to join those other chosen ones behind that wall . . . the brides of Christ.

Presently I went upstairs to pack. Not that there was much to pack now. Counting the money in my purse I discovered that I still had eighteen francs left after I had paid my bill. Eighteen francs for which I had now no further use. It was nice to think that there would from now on be no more need for money, that we had done with money for all time. I decided to give my purse to Rosie. I felt as I sat down on the bed,



adding another page or two to my mother's letter, that I should never forget the odour of new wine which permeated the whole of the inn, nor my little room with its gaudy wall-paper of a Chinese lantern design. I wondered how many novices had slept there, in the same bed with the same feelings and thoughts; or how many sorrowing mothers who, so Rosie told me, sometimes came to look at the outside of the wall or to ask the nun behind the grid at the convent door how Sister So-and-so was getting on. How many dreams must have woven themselves around those Chinese patterns.

As I raised my eyes from my black shoes, which Rosie had polished so brightly, I saw again those walls—those tall grey walls around this secret “city.” The convent was an island around which a kind of moat was formed by the river passing it on three sides. It made it look doubly solitary and doubly inaccessible. Each living person behind those walls, I imagined, would probably grow into a kind of island, too, each closed within herself with endless time for meditation until the very end of her life.

I could not think of anything further to say to my mother except to repeat that I should, indeed, be happy. Time was dragging, it was only nine o'clock. A herd of cows were driven along the street below, their bells, Swiss fashion, tinkling merrily from their

necks. Then I heard Stephany consoling her sad and silent mother in the next room. That girl, I thought was strong and cold in spite of her youth, an island unto herself already. "Don't be silly," I heard her saying in German, "don't be silly . . . life is like that . . . and I want it so."

It was different with Melanie, whose pale and trusting eyes had been lifted to her father's more calculating ones during breakfast as though somehow or another she was to enter that convent as a kind of hostage to his peace of mind and freedom. That was how it struck me. Then I heard Stephany laugh on the staircase, a deep, beautiful laugh. They were off. And so, as I was ready, too, and it was nearing the appointed time, I, too, went down.

"Good-bye, Rosie," I said, as I walked out on the stroke of ten, while the church bells rang to meet me and I handed her my purse.

"Ah!" she said, quite speechless for a moment, and pushed it in her apron pocket. Then she went down the stone steps with me and crossed the road by my side, and as we arrived on the private path leading to the convent gates she said good-bye. She was crying then, crying for me, a perfect stranger.

"Good-bye," she said again. "I'll post your letter now . . . and, well, if you ever need that money . . .

well, come and get it. I'll keep it for you."

At that she laughed again. We both laughed at that, and then hastily she ran back to the inn. What an absurd girl, I thought, in my youthful intolerance. . . . Yet I liked Rosie, but now as I approached my future home I forgot about her almost at once.

I began to feel still more excited. What was awaiting me behind these walls, behind that enormous creaking gate elaborately wrought in iron? Something final! Yes; but something real, too. There seemed to me so much meaning in every single stroke of the bells. The convent looked beautiful to me and pensive, almost spellbound, like a painting by Böcklin, only half real as, peering through the gate, I caught my first glimpse of it. The sun was shining brightly. That always made a difference. All the numerous windows of this heavenly kind of garrison reflected the sun and mirrored the passing clouds. Each window was draped with exactly the same starched, white, embroidered lace. It looked most dignified. Cloister! It spoke of peace, hitherto denied to mankind. It spoke of safety, too, and of happiness, and one felt as though the sun would always be shining there. It was a large place, built in three enormous blocks, which formed a quadrangle. As I closed the gate behind me my heart beat fast with

enthusiasm and once more I wondered what life really would be like beneath that roof! There came from the region of the church a sound of singing, just as I had imagined it would. A Latin chant was rising through the garden of wild chestnut-trees, saluting me, also just as I had imagined. Presently, walking along the wide cemented path, I passed a hothouse and innumerable glass frames, where a very old nun stood doing something with a ball of putty in her hand. Her wide woollen skirt was worn with kneeling and green with age. As I was going to speak to her she quickly and smilingly put her fingers to her lips to warn me that it was "silence" at this hour. Then she grinned broadly from a completely toothless mouth, and pointed to the porch which led to the front door. There was not another soul in sight. Every one was apparently inside the house or on the south side of it in another walled-in garden in which, from what I could see through a passage, innumerable chestnut-trees were losing their last leaves. So tremblingly I rang the bell, an old-fashioned bell with a heavy iron handle, and then I heard it echo loudly within. Almost at once someone withdrew a kind of shutter from a small grid in the centre of the heavy oak door, and the shockingly pale face of a young nun with a huge mole on her left cheek

peered out at me. And then, without a word, she loosened a safety-chain and let me in and the heavy door closed behind me.

I WAS inside. For ever. And suddenly I ceased to be afraid and grew alert at once to everything around. What struck me at once was the almost uncanny silence of the place. Thick cork lino covered the corridor, which stretched itself into the dark and unknown distance. Several nuns flitted by in soft black slippers without looking up at me. There was a smell of incense, of floor-polish, and of baking bread. . . . The little nun at my side, a mere slip of a girl, almost drowned in her wide habit, veil, and wide square sleeves, showed me into a reception room and begged me to be seated. It was an enormous room filled almost completely with a refectory table and many elaborately carved chairs. At the far end an almost life-sized painted Christ hung cadaverously upon an ebony cross with His arms spread out. Underneath an antique French clock in a glass case was ticking pompously, and by the table at the far end of the room, sitting opposite each other, were the German father of Melanie and the

Polish mother of Stephany. They were silent. In front of them stood two glasses, a carafe of water, and a litre of red wine. The baroness still showed traces of recent tears on her lovely, care-worn face. The German, however, seemed much less concerned.

"It's no use, madame," he said after a while, "pitying our daughters as much as that. It's up to them, surely, the same as it was up to us when we were young. Besides, I think it's harder for us than it is for them."

This counsel, I noticed, failed to comfort the gentle-looking mother, who, it was easy to see, had not the strength of will her daughter so easily displayed.

"It was all so sudden," she sighed, as though speaking of someone's death, looking almost accusingly up to a painting of a bovine Madonna hanging opposite her between two windows, entitled "The Mystic Rose." "Before we knew what had happened to her," she went on in a kind of moan, "Stephany came home one night, very late that was, long after midnight, and would not tell us where she had been although we had all waited up for her."

She had just stood by the door and looked at them all in turn, and then she had come in and kissed them all and told them that she was leaving the following week to become a nun. That was all. There had been no explanations. Her father, the baron, had wanted to

forbid it. He had been furious, had threatened to horsewhip her, had shrieked at her with rage, telling her she was a weakling, a defeatist, or an escapist, or something to that effect, whatever that may mean. He had bullied her and had wanted to know why, why, oh, why did she prefer a living death, annihilation? It had been no good. Stephany would not talk. She had only grown more determined. Now it was all over she felt almost glad. The German merely sat and yawned and presently drank the convent's wine. He was, I thought, clearly wanting to be gone. Listening to the baroness my mind went back to Uncle Daniel who too, like the baron, had spoken of "escape." How wrong they were. I felt convinced that each of us was willing to take up the Cross and that this was, indeed, renunciation, the deliberate choosing of the narrow path.

I had waited half an hour and none of us had spoken for some time. I felt a little sorry for this woman and this man having to return to where they came from, whereas we had come to our journey's end. Just then the little nun returned, called me by name, and took me down the passage to the office, where two middle-aged nuns sat writing at their desks. They did not seem to know that I was there, for I was not asked to sit down. They went on writing while I

looked round the walls at a gallery of popes and cardinals and an enormous painting, a copy of the "Last Supper." The nun nearest me, the Mother Superior, a square, obese woman, was putting her signature to innumerable papers on her desk. Her name was Adelheid. That was how she had signed her letters to me and to the Rev. Father Schmitt, and that was how she evidently signed those checks lying in front of her. Everybody called her "Ehrwürdige," your reverence. At last she rose and looked me up and down through her wire spectacles. Her habit, which reached down to the soles of her boots, was made of thick black serge, and was neatly patched in two places where her knees had worn holes. She looked profoundly matriarchal. There was nothing virginal about her appearance. She had a fat face, the colour of lard, and a pair of dark eyes which were prominent and non-committal. Like cherries, I thought. It was easy to see that she had great authority although she sounded friendly enough now. She welcomed me briefly and somewhat flabbily shook my hand. Her hands were short and soft. Then she bade me be seated, opposite her, facing the light as well as the other nun, whom she introduced as the reverend assistant mother, or "Die ehrwürdige Frau Hilfmutter." The latter was small and thin and had a shocking squint. Presently, to my utter surprise, she



tried to dissuade me at this last hour from joining the sisterhood. So many girls of my age, she suggested, especially in Catholic cantons, wanted to be nuns without, however, realizing that what they felt in the matter was not necessarily the "True Call."

"Do they?" I asked, genuinely surprised, remembering all my girl friends who were horrified at my decision, and who were almost without exception hankering after marriage, and a few of them after the stage and the rest after business careers. The reverend mother looked a little hard for a moment. I had, I felt, been rude to contradict.

"Well," she wanted to know, "what are your reasons for wanting to renounce the world?"

My heart skipped a beat. I did not know. After all, how could any one explain?

"Oh, just because . . . well, it's difficult to know. I shall be very happy here," I added brightly.

Then she smiled a little.

"Personal happiness . . . ah!" she said, and shook her head.

Then I handed her my papers, three letters from influential friends, my birth certificate, and some sort of agreement which I had had drawn up by a lawyer in case of so-and-so or, again, so-and-so, relating to property which, should I remain, my parents would be

willing to bequeath to the convent of the Mystic Rose. That, of course, was only fair. Then she asked me if I had any talents of any description. It seemed to please her to know that I had a diploma for music and she thought that maybe later on I could play the organ . . . or even teach the children attached to the convent. Then to my relief I was dismissed. I curtsied and walked out backwards as I had seen the young sister do, who stood outside now in the passage, evidently waiting for me. Behind her I caught a glimpse of Melanie throwing her arms around her father's neck, and I quickly looked away. The little nun, whose name was Bonaventura, led me down several ghostly unlit passages and up four flights of stairs into a dormitory which was partitioned off into cubicles. Pointing to the last of a row, bearing the number twenty-one, she gently pushed me in and then stopped to watch me unpack, leaning against the door-post. While I was filling the one and only drawer that was needed, she informed me that she came from Genoa, that she was, in fact, Italian, and had been at the Mystic Rose for seven years. I could tell that she was curious about me but I did not want to talk. I wished that she had left me alone to unpack by myself, but that seemed to be against the rule.

Then from a narrow locker she produced a thick

black woollen gown and a dark blue apron and a starched white cap, and asked me to change into these, and at twelve o'clock to come down to dinner. After that she left me, taking away my empty case. I heard the jingle of her rosary, which hung from her hips, as she glided down the passage. I was alone. The bells were ringing again. I listened to them while I put on my gown. It was only eleven o'clock, and they were ringing for the Angelus, the mystery of the Annunciation.

I, too, knelt on the floor and prayed; and once more I felt a little frightened. The novice's gown was far too loose for me, nor was it new, but had been handed down apparently from someone else. I quickly picked up my diary which had fallen on the floor. Diaries were forbidden, Sister Bonaventura had said. I hastily made a few entries and found a hiding-place for it underneath a floor-board. After that I put on my starched cap, but there was no mirror in my cell or cubicle, whose walls were mere wooden partitions about eight feet high. Above that there was a space of another foot or two and then the roof. I was lucky, though, I had a window, a tiny skylight it was, and when I climbed up on my chair I could just see the distant mountain tops. The sunshine streamed through it now, and as the sun was high it shone straight on to my narrow iron bed,

which was covered by a spotless starched white cover.

The streaming sunlight also exposed quite mercilessly the bareness of the tiny place. It was ugly. But that did not really matter now. Mere ugliness in outward things had ceased to be of any consequence to me. The main thing was that I was here at last. The pine floor-boards groaned disturbingly as I walked up and down in the little space, and I decided to sit still. It was marvellous to think that now mere plainness or ugliness had ceased to matter, and that thenceforth work ceased to be work but became pleasure, because it would all be done and endured for the glory of God. But presently I grew restless and went out into the passage, where I saw Stephany also standing on the threshold of her cubicle already dressed in her novice's garb, apparently taking stock of her little cabin, the varnished floor-boards, which creaked just like mine, and the tarnished paint on her outside wall where the damp had penetrated, and noting, above all, the absence of a window. She stood there as if appealing to its primitiveness, its unfamiliarity, and when she saw me her expression changed at once from surprise to indifference. Then she smiled. Together we examined our tiny "recesses" which were attached outside each cell, entirely surrounded by a dark green curtain, each containing a minute table with a miniature basin of

white enamel and pitcher to match, a glass, and a cake of yellow home-made soap. Stephany did not speak. I noticed, womanlike, how well she looked in her gown, filling it to perfection. But such observations were worldly, indeed, and I quickly cast them from my mind. Nothing like that mattered now to my young soul touched with religious fervour. I was eager to start my work and to begin my martyrdom.

A little later, Melanie, also dressed the same, joined us in the dormitory. The parting with her father over, she looked much happier; quite different, more alive, her placid face lit up from within, that enviable look which had always thrilled me so on the faces of those whose joys were no longer of this earth. She seemed the kind of girl who would some day become a saint, a real saint, whereas I would merely be a martyr. There was a difference, any one knew, between the two. We were now hanging about waiting for the hour to strike twelve, looking silently out of one of the windows as we waited. A nun collected our outdoor clothes while we stood there, and carried them away. We vaguely wondered why. I shall always see the garden as I saw it while waiting by that window; the autumn leaves blowing in and out of the pillared cloisters and the amazing perfection of the ploughed fields beyond the walls, also belonging to the Mystic Rose.

Other nuns came hurrying by, carrying bed-linen, distributing it in the cells, and as I watched them, for they were mysterious to me, I wondered if it was religion alone that gave them this luminous expression, or if it was the habit of discarding all things of the flesh, of living "outside their bodies"; or were they, as some of them looked, sick? Heavens, I vowed, how I would try to achieve such singleness of heart. That was how it would be, I thought, in time, and it seemed all three of us saw it like that, for we smiled happily at each other and with more warmth than hitherto. Once more, though, with a stab in my heart, I thought of home, and with an effort I swallowed my tears, and then mercifully the bell rang at last for dinner.

It was the most impressive thing imaginable to see over eighty nuns stand absolutely still and silent by their chairs, waiting for the arrival of the reverend mother. At first glance every one of them looked exactly alike; it seemed impossible to know one from another. Later, of course, it was quite easy to tell them apart and to know if a woman came from the north or south of Europe, even though it was impossible to see the colour of the hair, it being hidden underneath the veil.

Presently the reverend mother arrived, strutting along, her back straight, her chest out like a soldier,

almost like a German soldier doing the goose-step, for her voluminous skirt flew forward at every stride. We all looked down, of course, or tried to, especially we novices, whose places were at the bottom of the third refectory table near the lift which brought our dinner from the kitchen. We were to hand the food round, and then when every one was served eat ours, when, of course, it was quite cold. Not that we minded in the least. That, too, was done for the glory of God.

The whole crowd, after turning towards an enormous crucifix which was attached to the south wall, and praying for nearly nine minutes by the clock, sat down and began to eat in silence. We were like a multitude of black geese swooping down to eat. Then as every one was served with soup there was a signal, and we were allowed to talk. There seemed nothing much to say apparently, for the silence continued for a while. I took breath as I, too, sat down after all the others had been served with a heap of boiled rice which was eaten very slowly. There was no meat, no pudding. Anything sweet, I was told, was considered luxurious, and so was meat, and we were to get it only twice a week. Every countenance in front of me, as I had another look, seemed now not so much alike as different in colouring and in expression, except the older nuns, those touched by time, who looked startlingly alike,

equally unworldly, and strangely lacking individuality. There were not many old ones though. Many looked sick and several had resting by their side a stick or a pair of crutches. Most of them were young or youngish. A stranger coming in at that moment would have asked himself what there was about these young people, that they should wish to pray and work, and work and pray, morning, noon, and night in the darkness of their cells, the dusk of the chapel; to pray in the sunlight in the garden, so many young people who were by no means different from others, girls who had looks and were not without gusto for life . . . yet lived in a romantic world of their own, peopled, it seemed, with angels and saints, in which the supernatural was the natural. He would not have understood. But I did. We were here in pursuit of eternal happiness and filled, I thought, with the coming wonder of this "other world" and required nothing else. At least that was how I felt.

As we were serving the second helping of rice, commonly called *risotto* as it was mixed with a little cheese, a young nun rose and entered a pulpit in the centre of the room, and once more silence had to be observed. From an enormous book the meditations she read the following: "Cinis est cor ejus," she pronounced with a clear deep voice. "The tender flower of purity is for



ever assailed in the outside world. The source of all idealism ceases to flow where there is impurity. Love, beautiful and noble love, is dragged into the dust by blinding passion."

Looking down upon my plate, which was empty, I felt somewhat uncomfortable.

"The outer world," the young woman went on, "is making a God of that which we have in common with the beasts, in ignominiam, perversity of the mind, as the apostle said. But we," the nun went on, raising her eyes to the panelled ceiling, "we, the chosen brides of Christ, possess the grace by which we can merge with and surrender ourselves to His divine love. The virgin is owned [and here all the nuns bowed their heads] entirely by Him. My beloved is mine and I am His. Only the chaste can love with real greatness. The virgin lifts her face to her Master and knows Him through her own immaculate ways. It is the mark of the chosen ones, and Jesus says to them, as He said to the holy Rosa of Lima: 'Rosa, be my beloved bride.' The Master," the nun went on more quietly, glancing round the assembly, of which I felt the most unworthy member, "is for ever on the look-out for virgins whose pure angelic hands will help the waters of Bethsaida to rise, to give strength to this sick and wicked world."

Then the nun closed her book and walked back to her seat.

I was not so much interested now in my fellow novices as in some of the nuns. One of them especially, a tall girl with deep blue eyes in a pale thin face, who seemed so much absorbed with some secret thoughts of her own that every now and then just a ghost of a smile played round her lips. Her name, I was told later in the kitchen, was Sister Cornelia. There were two older nuns sitting at my table who interested me as well. They were the very opposite to Sister Cornelia, or, indeed, any other nun, and were evidently made of stouter stuff than the rest of them, looking brown and healthy and attacking their rice with noticeable gusto. They magnetized me. There seemed less modesty about them, as they did not keep their eyes glued down but met mine on a level across the table, and when I smiled at them they both smiled back. Their names were Sister Juliana and Sister Pelagia, and each of them, especially Pelagia, was blessed with a definite moustache.

At last we all filed out, that is, the others did, to recreation, while we novices cleared the tables and went below into the kitchen to wash up. What struck me more than anything was the amazing control of

movement, the perfect timing of speech each nun displayed. I wondered why that was. Was it the outcome of so much silence? We were still talking, or allowed to talk, until two o'clock, when it was practically over for the day.

Down in the kitchen I found myself with strangers once more. The nuns there were for the most part Swiss. One of them was Dutch, her name was Sister Cecilia, who, as I found out later, was slowly going mad. She was strong, broad-faced, broad-hipped, cow-like, placid—apparently. Another one was French, a small woman with a mobile, wide mouth and eyes wide apart. She was like a cat, a little watchful; her name was Benedicta. She told me, in a sudden burst of confidence, that she came from Paris, a wicked city, but very beautiful. Every one longed to be friendly, and we three new-comers were accepted at once as a matter of course. In fact, they seemed to like new-comers; apparently it gave them a fresh interest. When we finished in the kitchen there were twelve minutes left for our recreation in the inner garden. We were given a pair of galoshes each which we were to wear over our black felt shoes whenever we walked outside the house, wet or fine. So, for a while, Melanie and I walked up and down between some cabbage-beds, and she began to tell me a little of her childhood, her mother, and the

inflation and the ugliness of modern life and thought, and her desire for beauty and her hope of finding it here at the Mystic Rose. She thought that the world was sacrificing everything to modernity, and people were selling their birthrights for a mess of pottage.

And as we walked through the cloist rs, where nuns walked alone or in twos, talking of their work or reading their breviaries, the hour struck and we returned to the house, removed our galoshes, put them into our numbered lockers underneath some stairs, and each went her way, silently carrying the secret of her own thoughts with her. I thought the sisters very simple and very lovable indeed, and I felt extremely happy to be there. Every one seemed happy, I thought, even those white, twisted-looking women with big eyes, hobbling along on crutches.

The rest of the novices were now sent out into the fields to collect the turnips, while we new-comers were taken in hand by Sister Gabriella, our novice mistress. Sister Gabriella was about forty-seven, and no one, it was whispered, had ever seen her smile. She had an enormous hooked nose and her mouth was thin and hard. Her eyes were snapping like a man's, and I soon saw that every one was afraid of her and consequently hated her in that suppressed, gentle way of nuns. We all gathered in a kind of class-room lined with books

of devotion, dictionaries, Latin, French, and German grammar books. Before each of us was a pen and an inkpot and a scribbling block. As in all the rooms, there was an ebony cross on the wall with an ivory Christ attached to it to which we turned and prayed. Sister Gabriella seated herself behind her desk and began to turn the leaves of a book. We all sat down. Presently she scanned our upturned faces, one by one, as if to examine our consciences, and then she began:

“You have now, for all time, withdrawn yourselves from life for the sake of Jesus, in order to find out why we are here in this world at all and what is our destiny. We are here,” she went on prophetically, “for one thing only . . . to prepare ourselves for the world to come and to save our souls. That, and that alone, is why we were sent into this wicked world, into this vale of tears. All else is of no consequence. To you it will be made easier to enter paradise than to others, for you have now all the facilities by which you will be able to merge with Jesus. [Here she bowed deeply, and we all bowed our heads.] We are here to save our immortal souls. It is up to you to conform to the rules of this blessed Order. It is up to you to cast worldly thoughts from your minds. I know that henceforth none of you will ever suffer the unspeakable calamity of walking in mortal sin. And now let us pray: ‘O Jesus, give us a

good life, a pure life, a selfless life, may our sacrifice please You.' ”

Then followed a “Hail, Mary!” and then our first Latin lesson began.

An hour later we went into the kitchen to help some sisters pickle beetroot and red cabbage. That was not for our own use, we were told, but was sold to numerous buyers. The kitchen was enormous, the stove twice the size of my cell. There was, of course, a crucifix on the wall between rows of the most brilliantly polished brass and copper pans which were never used, as they were relics of the past and were put there for show alone, a kind of outlet, in a way, for housewifely natures. The real cooking was done in a series of much-chipped enamel pans. A middle-aged nun, very ro-tund, very cheerful and motherly, supervised our work, and then, after a while, she left us alone at it, disappeared into the scullery, closed the door, and presently emerged with a pair of pink, much-faded, and very outsize knickers which she had just taken off and washed, and hung them in the airing cupboard above the stove to dry. She grinned at me.

“It’s the only pair I have,” she said apologetically, and without a trace of that false modesty which later I was to encounter so much.

Her name was Sister Victoria. She went across to the

stove and stirred up a mess in a deep vatlike pan in the centre of which bubbled a pool of grease, and a sour smell rose from its depth. That was soup; the kind commonly served to tramps or beggars at the door. Remnants of meat, rice, bread, and milk were thrown in there.

"It's quite substantial, really," Sister Victoria said.

On a shelf above were a series of enamel plates with tin spoons attached on a string, also to be used by tramps. When the door-bell rang round about midday Sister Bonaventura would peep through the grid and shout down into the kitchen: "Two soups," or "Four soups," or "Bread only," as one does at an hotel, and then Sister Victoria would stir the broth a bit and ladle it out. The lift would be pulled up by Sister Bonaventura, and the plates placed on a kind of revolving tray let into the wall at the side of the main door. The soup was thus conveyed outside to the porch where vagrants stood or sat and sometimes slept.

Soon it was five o'clock and "vespers" was being served, our last meal of the day—coffee, a dish of prunes, dry bread; no butter, no sugar, and no jam. It was a frugal meal. Once more we were allowed to talk, but after vespers it was "silence" again, and soon we formed fours in the corridor and marched to church for Rosary and Benediction. What struck me most as

I entered the church was the statue of the "Heavenly Queen." Her slim white and blue image stood like a vision above the altar. On her head she had a crown of gold set with jewels, red, green, and blue. Above her a starry canopy reflected the candlelight. It was but an image, of course, a painted idol, made of wood, but nevertheless she was the local mother, Mary, credited by some with miraculous power. The church was in darkness except for the warmly lit-up altars, and as I was sitting at the back with Stephany on my right and a strange little novice on my left, I felt as though I were taking part in some outlandish pagan ritual. I imagined myself in a tropical forest far from "the world without," branches meeting overhead, and the light above the altar hovering will-o'-the-wisps, and the murmuring of the nuns the humming of myriads of insects.

Suddenly, a priest appeared, clad in white and red and gold, a tall, thin man with a fine head. That was Father Anthony, our counsellor and shepherd. The organ roared like waves thundering on a sandy beach, and Father Anthony prayed. The cloud of incense rose, and someone began to sing up in the organ loft, a sweet, silvery voice, though plaintive: "Tantum ergo sacramentum." That was Sister Cornelia, the one who sat near me at table, the one who had been smiling to herself. And then we prayed again:



“O Mater castissima, Mater inviolata, Mater intermerata, O Mother most chaste, mystical Rose, spiritual Vessel, Queen conceived without sin, ora pro nobis.”

The little novice on my left whispered to me: “Would you like my *Emmanuel*?” she asked.

I did not know what she meant, and, as I nodded my head, she pushed a book of devotion into my hand, bound in red leather, on which, printed in gilt lettering, was the word “Emmanuel.” Opening it at random, I read: “O Emmanuel, my bridegroom, my beloved, come to my window in the night. O Emmanuel, my beloved, knock at my window that I may open to you.” This language of love, beautiful though it was, made me think of John and Marti, and I quickly closed the book.

We went to bed early at the Mystic Rose after some further praying in the dining-hall, where, for another twenty minutes, we had been kneeling on the floor. It was only half-past eight. I had only just got into bed when someone turned out the lights. It was long before I could sleep; and in what seemed to me to be the middle of the night I was awakened.

“Bleshbejescrise,” someone was saying.

“Bleshbejescrise,” someone was repeating just a little crossly.

I shot up in bed instantly, remembering where I was

and that something had to be done quickly. Lights were switched on. It was a quarter to five. We were getting up, getting washed, dressed.

From where I sat putting on my stockings I could see a square bit of sky still black and studded with stars. Someone knocked at my door, repeating, "Bleshbejescrise," or "Blessed be Jesus Christ," to which every one answered, once they were awake, of course: "In eternity, Amen." In the half gleam of a gas flare at the far end of my row I groped my way to the recess to wash in the tiny much-chipped enamel basin. The water was icy cold and there was not much of it. I had a glimpse here and there of a head, a shaven head, or a pair of feet, alas, none too clean, or a piece of flannel petticoat peeping from behind a curtain. I quickly slipped on my heavy gown, quickly emptied the basin in the lavatory as the others did, and then I was ready with the rest to go down into the dining-hall to morning prayers, and thence along a maze of corridors to Mass and to Communion.

Our footsteps made no sound at all as we walked down the garden path out into the night. The path and the grass verge were wet with dew. How sweet that walk was, the stars above, and the feeling that, in spite of the walls, we were still in the world, the open world, not just cooped up together as we had been in the

night. Others, too, looked up to the starry sky as we walked along. It was exciting to think that the rest of the world was still abed. I thought of Rosie down at the inn, only a stone's throw away. She would be still fast asleep, so would my mother, too. The church was cold and dark, but, even so, it was picturesque and awe-inspiring. I was happy. It was, I thought, a soothing, gentle kind of happiness.

After breakfasting in silence we made our beds, which were afterwards inspected minutely and pulled apart if not done well. Stephany, Melanie, and I were permitted to have a look round with our novice mistress, Sister Gabriella, of whom we were all secretly afraid. It was cowardly, I thought, to be afraid of someone, of any one, now we had laid our burdens upon His shoulder and committed our cares into His keeping. It was necessary, Sister Gabriella thought, for us to know where things were kept, so we followed her, she walking constantly ahead of us. Tame pigeons, of which there were hundreds, darted above us and at our feet as we walked down to the second house where the bakery was, where a young man daily baked the convent's bread, single-handed; bread made of wheat and rye.

"This is our baker," Sister Gabriella said, "his name is Alfonso."

Alfonso slowly rose from his chair, where he had been lounging lazily, and nodded. His arms and face were covered with flour, giving him the appearance of a clown. His eyes stuck out like two black buttons, and he had that slightly impertinent, patronizing manner all men seemed to adopt in the presence of nuns.

"I've never seen this place so dirty," said Sister Gabriella as we walked out behind her, and as he heard this, Alfonso impatiently threw on to his bookshelf a ball of tobacco which he had been rubbing between his hands.

His was, it seemed, the only library at the Mystic Rose. A number of dirty Tauchnitz editions filled it. They were so dirty there was no telling their contents. Sister Gabriella's skirt had got slightly entangled with Alfonso's spittoon, which was an empty cake-tin, and one felt that if she had not been a holy woman she would have sworn. We held our skirts a little higher than was strictly considered correct as a few dead cockroaches were swept along as well by Sister Gabriella's hem.

We came to the wash-house where half a dozen nuns were busy. There was not much light in there, but even in the twilight their faces looked flushed and perspiring. No one spoke, and only one looked up with some curiosity. Not that the coming of young novices

was not an event of interest to them. Any one destined to live their lives, I thought, any one having decided on so momentous a thing, was bound to be interesting. But I soon learned that there were among the nuns many degrees of awareness, and often they were too tired, as well, to care. And then, for a while, for the sake of politeness, it seemed, we knelt in a home-made grotto of painted cement which adjoined the wash-house, and then, feeling refreshed, we walked under the shadow of the wall and came to the piggery. The pigs were very much alive and noisily interested in their food. Yet it was not a happy-looking piggery, it was damp and very muddy, surrounded as it was with far too many trees. Watching the animals I was reminded of a picture I had seen on the day before in a book of devotion which had been lying in a class-room, entitled "The Temptation of St. Anthony." The temptation was not, as it usually is, portrayed in the shape of the devil himself, or, humiliating as it is to women, in the shape of a female body, but by a jolly swarm of little pigs. Sister Gabriella was telling us how an evil spirit had recently visited the pigsty and had caused some sickness there, but that the Rev. Father Anthony had come round and cast him out with holy water, exorcized him with prayers. I did not know that revenants and such-like were in the habit of be-

witching pigs, but naturally I kept silent. I was tremendously keen to learn and this was really interesting. Yet I was trying to catch Stephany's eye. I knew, I sensed it, that although she, like me, was religious, it was in a different way from the nuns, not quite as unquestioningly as all that.

After this we came to the river. Below the piggery there was a waterfall which roared beneath a bridge, but, alas, we quickly turned away from that and went to see the schools. Sister Gabriella wanted us to see everything. She pointed this way and that towards nondescript statues, sheds, stables, cherry-trees, vineyards on a rise, and an orchard on the south side. The school was well separated from the convent by a high wall and an overground passage which, of course, none of the scholars ever crossed.

"Some day," said Sister Gabriella, "if you are any good at all, you may be able to teach the children."

"I hope so," said Stephany, who had not spoken a word since our arrival.

Sister Gabriella looked quickly up to the tall and slightly haughty girl, not, I noticed, without a glint in her eye. I saw in a flash that this novice mistress of many years' standing was not without a touch of cruelty in her nature, and that she liked a struggle with a novice.

"Well," she said, with a suspicion of unnunlike sarcasm, "and what, may I ask, can you do?"

"One never can tell, Sister Gabriella, can one?" Stephany answered simply.

But now we arrived at the gymnasium which had recently been added, a belated tribute to modern times. It possessed a trapeze and a vaulting horse. A nun was busy instructing small girls in the art of swinging. Perilously she hung on the trapeze: hood, veil, cape, petticoats and all. She looked like a bundle of clothes feebly attached to a line.

Between two ladders and a climbing-rope was yet another crucifix, and someone had placed a bunch of autumn crocuses in a jar beneath it. The woman hanging on the trapeze with thin white hands and feeble wrists made me grow conscious of our heavy voluminous clothes. How should we, I wondered, be able to endure this garb once it was summer and we had to work in the sun!

In the pottery some older girls were taught how to make pots, tea and coffee sets, and to paint and glaze them. In another room we saw a dozen nuns or so silently doing fine embroidery on frames, and making vestments. Our next visit was to the stables where the cows were being milked by nuns, their skirts pinned up with safety-pins. There were several horses, too, a Ford

delivery-van, two tractors, and a few other agricultural contraptions. Here we met the cobbler who made all our boots; he, too, was casually introduced to us. He bowed and scraped a bit to Sister Gabriella, quite unlike the baker, but gave us a look behind her back which made me sum him up as a pious rogue. After an hour we joined the other novices again at lessons. Stephany looked very tired now and leaned quite motionless against the class-room wall.

“You! Stand up!” suddenly hissed Sister Gabriella, and Stephany moved slowly from the wall, her hands still folded behind her back. She did not apologize.

As a whole, the novices did not interest me very much. It was the nuns I was eager to know, those who had “weathered” the years. But that, I realized, would be difficult, at least at first, for we were not to be admitted to many of their gatherings. At that moment a few novices and candidates, that is, those who were about to make their final vow, came running breathlessly, fearing to be late. As we stood by our desks the sunlight shone through the lace curtain and fell on Melanie’s blonde hair. Next to her was the girl called Marietta, the “staggering beauty” whom Rosie had mentioned at the inn; Marietta, the favoured one, as we found out later. I saw her glancing across to Stephany as though she sensed in her a rival, a rival in sheer



worldly beauty. And then we prayed.

“And the Holy Ghost descended in the shape of a dove,” Sister Gabriella read. “The beating of the wings of a dove can be likened to the whisperings of love, the love which comes from heaven and implores us to hearken, to respond. Oh, let the wings of the dove be spread over us that we too, like Jesus, may become children of the Holy Ghost.”

After this we had an English lesson with a very fat Alsatian nun who had once, in the distant past, lived in that part of London where costermongers were at home. She addressed the Virgin as we prayed as “our Lydy.” There followed a lesson in Latin with yet another nun, and then for the rest it was housework and manual labour out of doors. It was nice to get back into the kitchen to Sister Victoria once more. Her knickers had gone from the airing cupboard, and she showed me how to cut the baker’s five-pound loaves into portions with a guillotine. And then, as I stood waiting for fifty pints of milk to boil, there was a little time for contemplation. I could, from where I stood, see three elderly nuns in the distance pitchforking manure into a cart, and then laboriously trying to heave and pull it round a bend. It seemed a very heavy load. Some distance behind them walked our Father Anthony, a vigorous young priest, carrying his breviary in his hand.

He too, like myself, was absorbed in meditation. The cows meandering behind him added to the peacefulness of the whole scene. Down by the wash-house perspiring nuns were patiently carrying enormous baskets of wet washing out on to the meadow and spreading them on the grass to dry. I could see a strip of our vineyard, too. All the wine that came from our ground went to the monastery of St. Barnabas near by, to the monks. They took the whole of our crop. As far as I could judge nothing had been left undone to make the Mystic Rose a prosperous and self-contained community. Dear me, I thought, what a strange and interesting world! What, I wondered, would Uncle Daniel say if he saw all these women substituting one life for another, possessing nothing, wanting nothing; and what if he could hear them sing, the trees echoing to their singing? What if he saw all these women, of good family mostly, who could have stayed at home and married "money," and dressed in gay clothes . . . and sent their sons to wars? And he had thought it a foolish waste of life! And I also thought of Uncle Oscar, whose ideals had merely gained him the reputation of a crank.

Then Sister Victoria suddenly shouted: "Look out! the milk."

It was gently boiling over. And then it was time for another meal. How the hours flew! Again eighty nuns

in their black gowns reaching to the ground, their veiled heads bowed, stood silent and then prayed to God to bless their frugal meal of a pint of coffee and a chunk or two of bread. No jam, no sugar, and no butter. Then they all solemnly kissed the crucifixes which dangled from their necks, and again the voice of a nun was heard droning away at another chapter from a book of meditations. Again she spoke about those living in sin, who had fallen from grace by impurity, and would never know the depth of their iniquity. And again the silent trooping through the cloisters and the garden to the church, while the bells rang, and the organ thundered out a joyful hymn. And so often during the course of that day, my life seemed indeed beautiful and, of course, intensely mystical. What lay outside the Mystic Rose seemed infinitely far away.

THE autumn colours, the hillside, the elms, and the birches against the forest of pines, all were part of the ecstatic tumult within our young hearts. Our bodies were tired by the time evening came; we were often sick with fatigue, and it was often difficult to kneel and rise and to kneel again. The crows collected in the

spinney by the wayside grotto and chattered all day; and the convent's cats made love half through the night, and we all turned in our creaking beds as the moon shone through our skylights. When the clock struck two I knew I must take my turn to pray at the shrine of the Mystic Rose, to share in the unbroken vigil which went on day and night. I staggered from my bed, heavy with sleep, crashing into my water-pitcher in the darkness, and then, under the eye of the moon, I groped my way downstairs to the little private chapel which was behind the church. Without speaking, I met Sister Cornelia at the door, Sister Cornelia in whom I was so interested, who sang so sweetly and carried about with her that secret Mona Lisa smile.

As we came into the dimly lighted place to relieve two nuns from their hour's vigil by the altar, we lay prostrate and kissed the floor-boards. And as the others left to go to bed we prayed slowly, loudly, in turns, kneeling side by side, each saying three sentences, reading them from a book which was supported on the *prie-dieu*. These were the same prayers which had been said and repeated without a single pause in the convent of the Mystic Rose day and night, through peace and war, for three hundred years. We were praying for those outside, those in danger, those in hospitals, in pain, those in prisons, those living in fear, and those

making light of love; for all the sinners in the universe, and all the sufferers while they lay and slept. An owl screamed outside as we murmured our responses and Sister Cornelia's hands trembled as she turned the leaf. Those nightly vigils or rituals seemed to me to be the most romantic thing in the life of the convent, and there I felt nearer than at any other time to God, the spirit of the universe, and to all those whom I loved.

Sister Cornelia sighed frequently. I glanced at her out of the corner of my eye as she knelt close to me, and I felt that with the slightest encouragement on my part she might stop reading, abandon a pose, and tell me all her secrets. I do not know how I knew, but I knew that she was not happy, that she had not as yet found peace. I had observed her at table many times. She was always smiling to herself, a queer sort of smile it was, a little nervous, perhaps, but certainly not happy.

Suddenly the cats screamed again, and then, to my horror, Sister Cornelia laughed. It was a short laugh and I wondered if I had imagined it. It might have been a delusion. She pulled herself together, though, and in the light of the flickering yellow taper she looked grave once more. But now the spell was broken and our prayers seemed a hollow effort, our sentences grew forced, our voices artificial, and our minds began to wander. I thought of Cornelia instead. What was

it that had made her laugh? It had been frightening. Was it hysteria? Or was she going mad? I had now ceased to think of sinners, but remembered that this was wash-day and that three hundred and eighty chemises, two hundred and forty sheets, towels, and pillow-slips, flung into a tremendous heap in the wash-house, would have to be attended to by us novices shortly after dawn. So quickly our moods changed! So easily were they affected by an incident like this.

By the flickering lights in the awakening dawn, with the first sparrows twittering, we rose and made room for two other women who were already lying prone upon the well-scrubbed floor behind us. At the door we parted, again without a word and without a look, without any kind of human recognition. Creeping back into the dormitory and into bed for a while, fully dressed, I could no longer sleep. I heard others turning in their beds, hitting out against the walls, while some were talking in their sleep. Those were the imaginative ones, the highly strung ones, and those who could not do their lessons because they were too tired and there was never any time to learn. And they were afraid of Sister Gabriella. Then the first cocks crowed and the cows were mooing in their stalls, and a nun came creeping along calling "Bleshbejescrise," and off we went to pray again and then to early mass.

THE Rev. Father Anthony was an ascetic, and he looked it. There was no nonsense about him. But short and chubby Father Joseph was of an affectionate nature, sympathetic, sad with those who felt sad and discouraged. In spite of this, or because of this, he was not very popular among the nuns. He had once been a village priest, and had now retired to our shores to end his days in peace. Father Anthony had been sent from the famous monastery of Neuveville to administer this community of nuns. He had been at the Mystic Rose for seven years, and it was whispered that he might presently be replaced by someone else. It had been a long stretch for a studious young man to be separated from his fellows and the absorbing library of his monastery, to live among a crowd of women. He did not care for women. He thought them sentimental, mentally inferior, hysterical even. He knew that, being a man, he was religious in another way. He believed in being temperate and calm, for that was what he said, although he did thump the pulpit when he preached, especially when he preached of hell. It was said in the kitchen and whispered in the sewing-room that he was a "bad confessor," that was, he cut one

short when one grew expansive, asked almost no questions at all, and absolved the nuns mechanically. He was, in short, impersonal, intangible, almost as distant as God Himself.

That was not very satisfying, and yet they all adored him, they adored him because he was strong. He was, they felt, a man. It was Saturday, and he was preparing his sermon, walking slowly up and down beneath the convent wall. Asters and chrysanthemums were smiling up at him, but he did not see them. He was pleased with his sermon, or seemed to be, closed his note-book with a snap, opened his breviary, and said his office. Sister Bonaventura, the Italian, Sister Roberta, and Sister Martha, busy in the store-room, nudged each other as he passed beneath their window with his calm and steady stride. They waited, breathlessly, until he passed again, noting his broad shoulders, his strong hands. Thoughts, pardonable, worldly thoughts came straying into our contemplations. Thoughts were, alas, often irresponsible. Recalled by the church bells, we knelt down between boxes, sacks, and moustetraps and recited the Angelus once more.

Every one was busier than ever on Saturdays, the day we cooked our Sunday dinner and the choir practised in the music room. Sister Cornelia's voice could be heard above all others as it rippled down from high



above. The Rev. Father Joseph was listening to her, too. He had just opened his study window. The house in which he lived, the so-called guest house, stood near the iron gates in the shadow of the tower. It was also the home of Father Anthony, who lived in the flat above him. These two priests kept strictly apart, being so utterly different that, although they were neighbours in Christ, they quite commonly got on each other's nerves. The guest house was quite frequently visited by priests who came in search of rest or change, and were allotted rooms on the top floor beneath the roof, from where, on a clear day, it was said, one had a view of three different countries.

And now, for the first time, Sister Juliana, our organist, gave me a lesson. Sister Juliana was one of the two masculine-looking nuns usually sitting at my table. She was intensely musical, and quite a favourite with Father Anthony, who seemed to trust her, and to treat her as an equal. There was nothing feminine about Sister Juliana, nothing superfluous except, of course, her moustache. Her speech, her figure, all had a quality strangely masculine as though belonging to an intermediate sex. She was also, I noticed, almost the only really healthy nun. Sister Therese, Sister Ursula, Sister Maria, Sister Adela, Sister Gonzaga, and many others I had already found, to my horror, suffered from

consumption. Tuberculosis seemed to be the ultimate fate of almost every one in the convent. It was pleasant, though, to watch Sister Juliana playing to me.

"You should play that just a little faster," Father Anthony said, as he stood quite unexpectedly behind us.

Sister Juliana rose and curtsied to the priest as was the custom, and then sat down again and played it faster.

"For goodness' sake," he then went on, "stop Sister Cornelia from putting all that tremolo into her singing. It's sickly sweet, that's what it is, sickly. Tell her she deceives herself."

He then climbed down from the organ loft to our colourful little church with its childishly ornate and sentimental trimmings, such as the St. Joseph, with his child-like pink and white face, the blue, golden-starred ceiling, the confessionals ornamented with fretwork. It was a friendly church, though, just because of that. It was filling now with penitents who had come from the distant village to confess their sins. The baker came, too, and the cobbler and the stable-boy. They had to.

Later in the afternoon I was sent with two nuns to gather the last of the season's apples. Tons of apples had been collected during the last few weeks and

hauled to the cider-press by us weak women, with that supernatural strength which enabled Samson to slay thousands with the jawbone of an ass. One of the nuns stood high up on the ladder exposing two petticoats of different hues, and the other picked up the fallen fruit, while I was steadying the somewhat unstable ladder. Those petticoats were compulsory; but they were not, as one might guess, worn for warmth in summer, but to prevent one's figure being outlined even in the strongest gale. That was, I thought, unreasonable. It was also rather boring holding ladders for hours on end, and it was then that, for the first time since I was at the Mystic Rose, Satan tempted me. I was not quite so "other-worldly" as I had thought some weeks ago. I did not as yet possess the grace by which I could forget that I was very thirsty even though I could now almost lift a ton.

We were strictly forbidden to eat our own home-grown fruit. Yet here was I, after my self-important renunciation, ready to barter paradise for a single apple. I know it sounds unbelievable. "After all," said Satan, "you don't want to drift along like that, taking all their silly rules for granted even though you might wish to perfect yourself. No wonder," he suggested, "everybody is ill, eating nothing but starchy food, and needing to be dosed with herbal teas every Friday

night. After all, it's not really a sin, only one of their man-made rules. And it is a very stupid rule."

Well, there were the apples, basketfuls around me everywhere, and as I looked about me up to the silent mountains, I asked myself: "What do they care about rules and offenses." And then I looked up the ladder and then behind me, and quickly took an apple from a basket and had a bite. One bite. But consummation was not to be as circumstances intervened. Sister Gabriella came strolling by reading her divine office, and I quickly dropped it in the grass. And now having given the devil my little finger, he, according to Father Anthony's Sunday sermon, was all out for the whole of my hand. I thought frantically of food, for I was now surcharged with appetite.

I felt as lonely and as sorry for myself as a babe in the wood, and from food to Marti and to John was not such a far cry, after all, which just went to show, though, how one sin led to another. I thought of my mother's letter, too, which arrived in the morning, her first. I had not read it yet. There had been no time. Letters were not encouraged, for soon, when we were nuns, we should have to do almost entirely without them. The letter had been opened, too, and censored. The sky had now darkened. I accepted it as an omen of disaster and twice I surreptitiously crossed myself. I had not

much cared for the expression on Sister Gabriella's face. It had boded difficulties.

The nun climbed down from the ladder, and we carried the fruit to the press, which was in the cellar underneath the bakehouse. There we removed our shoes and stockings, and while some of the sisters, using all their strength, turned the handle of the press, others collected the juice and filled the barrels. With our naked feet we stamped on the crushed fruit until it became a mush and then pressed it into square, wooden shapes which we laid neatly in rows in the open air to dry. This made fuel for the bakehouse and the central heating. Later, the cider was dispatched to the monastery of Neuveville where it was distributed to the monks. There was no need for herbal tea for them apparently.

While these critical thoughts occupied my mind another novice came for me.

"You are wanted at the office," she said. She looked away as she told me, as if confused.

Anything, she must have thought, might happen to me now. It meant but one thing, of course, punishment. One had been found out. Of course, it might be a telegram from home; parents sometimes died before their time of broken hearts. But no. Having nowhere to wipe my feet I slipped on my stockings and my boots

and ran. The novice had turned and gravely led the way ahead of me. My heart beat faster. Before me on the reverend mother's desk, beside her breviary, lay an apple, and as she rose she picked up the tell-tale fruit and slowly turned it in her hand, pointing to the marks my teeth had made. In this gloomy office time stood still and apparently became eternal. She did not even speak. Her expression was shocked and deeply pained.

"You?" she said at last.

I nodded.

Then she opened the door, beckoned me to follow her, pointed to the private chapel, and as I went inside she firmly closed the door behind me.

She had not meant to speak. It was the hour of silence, nor had there been any need to speak. It was enough. I was to go in there to ask forgiveness of the Bleeding Heart before going to Benediction. It was almost dark now, and it was a ghostly chapel in this twilight with but two burning tapers lighting up the place. I was anxious lest someone might search my cell and discover my diary there and my few photographs. These things, I knew now, were forbidden. And then I thought of the apple and how far from saintliness I still was, how unfit, really, to renounce the world. Two nuns were kneeling in front of me; one of them, who was getting on in years, was moving her body to and

fro incessantly as though she were in agony. Perhaps she was. Suddenly, quite unaccountably, I too wanted to laugh, like Sister Cornelia. It was so quiet and I was so hungry, and I should now miss my meal. The moon was up early and was shining bright, and shafts of light fell across the wooden floor. I nearly fell asleep. Suddenly I heard the droning sisters move, saying: "In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti," and the clock struck the hour, and two other nuns arrived to take their places and I was free to go. I had been in there an hour. Every one knew now that I had been doing grievous wrong as I had not appeared for vespers.

This was not the last of it, of course. Sister Gabriella knew, and told me that such a thing had never happened there before. Once more she bade me read the rules of the Order, and after that I had to confess. But then the bells were ringing for the Ave Maria. I had been on my legs and knees since five o'clock in the morning and I was now too tired to mind. During Benediction I fell asleep, and I dreamt I saw an apple-tree full of devils who were telling me that I was damned. As I awoke and returned to reality the transition was not such a joyful relief as it should have been.

At night, after every one had gone to bed, I read my mother's letter in the lavatory beneath the gas-

light, and as I was returning to my cell thinking of my mother I distinctly heard Sister Cornelia weeping. It was not the first time, of course. Others had heard her too, but, of course, no one took the slightest notice of tears at any time. I pictured her lying there on her wretched bed conscious that she lacked the making of a nun, of years ahead of alternate sadness and exultation until she, too, grew calm like the others and more resigned. By the water-tap I had met Sister Gonzaga, who frequently appeared to walk in her sleep. She had lately been in one of her exalted moods, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, and saying nothing; having also filled her bed with dozens of half-inch copper tacks, borrowed from the tool-shed, to mortify the flesh, and having fasted for days, refusing all food except bread. I wondered if I, too, would ever achieve such saintliness as this. It was rumoured that she had now had another of her visions. The Virgin had come to her silently in the night, her slim body, draped in loose, white clothes, giving off an odour of incense which had lingered in her cell until morning, when every one could smell it quite distinctly. She had felt the Virgin's breath upon her cheek as she had gazed down upon her from another world, perhaps the world of death, her face lit up with agony. Then, according to Sister Gonzaga, this resigned and tortured face of the



Virgin had changed and an expression of serenity had taken its place, and she had spoken:

“Soon you, too, will be in paradise.”

And now every one envied Sister Gonzaga her dream. Many novices might have been discovered staring out into the darkness of their cells hoping for a vision. Alas, usually none came. I did not do that, though I found it somewhat frightening. Besides, I knew that I was not yet worthy.

THE day for our weekly confessions arrived. It was three o'clock on Thursday afternoon. There were two confessionals in church, but we did not use those; they were meant for villagers and pilgrims and the pupils from the schools. We novices, with the candidates and nuns, confessed our sins in the *apotheke*, the pharmacy, a room adjoining the private chapel, a place in which our medicines were kept. At one end of it was a black leather sofa, a very hard sofa, very old, stuffed with horse-hair, on which were laid those who had the misfortune to faint while kneeling in church. Someone always fainted, either from lack of air or from fasting. Those who became hysterical were taken there as well,

and were usually dosed by a very knowing nun whose name was Sister Hedwig. Not that she had any medical knowledge of any kind, but she had a flair for doing the right thing at the right moment. Every one said what a "good sort" she was. She was rough sometimes but not without sympathy. "For Jesus' sake," she'd say, not unkindly, shaking a hysterical patient, "do buck up. Any one might think you were the only one to feel like that," or: "Never mind, we've all gone through with it, you know . . . and you will, too," or: "It's worth it, you know, in the end."

On Thursday afternoon this room was reserved for confession, and strangely enough no one was ever ill or in need of the horse-hair sofa on Thursday afternoon. Confession was such a pleasant change from ordinary routine, indeed quite exciting, for one could not be sure if Father Anthony would lose his temper or if he would be in a gentler mood. Whatever he did, every one looked completely rapt when leaving his presence, as though having seen God.

A huge leather arm-chair and a footstool were drawn to the centre of the room, where he was to sit in comfort while we knelt on the floor. An ancient, slightly moth-eaten, red plush curtain was drawn on a wire across the room, partitioning it. The enormous medicine cupboard, with its glass door displaying bottles

filled with salts, powders, and castor oil, an enema suspended on a string, herbal teas, cough mixtures, and disinfectants, filled one half of the room; the sofa, the chair, and the priest filled the other. One side was in darkness, where we, the penitents, knelt on the bare hard floor.

In the chapel of the Mystic Rose adjoining we queued up, waiting patiently for our turn; glad to be resting for a while. Sometimes we had to wait for an hour and more, examining and re-examining our consciences, trying sometimes by hook or by crook to find some lurking sin, almost producing some imaginary crime in order to have something worth while to confess. The air was full of a kind of suggestiveness difficult to define. Stephany knelt at my side, looking sick, her pale face disfigured with spots.

Confession was, in a way, an escape; at least, it was at first when solitude or silence were so difficult to bear. There was someone to talk to for a while of oneself. That helped, but, alas, it was not encouraged by Father Anthony. Father Joseph would have been different, by all accounts, but he was not our confessor, he only confessed the children from the school.

I had stolen an apple. I had hidden a diary in which I scribbled daily a few lines. I had been day-dreaming

during prayers and, in spite of my youthful ecstasy, I had been a little critical of my environment.

Father Anthony was late, he was often late and kept us waiting. But now he came walking down the aisle dressed in his black soutane, a purple stole round his neck, his head high. He disappeared into the pharmacy. Then the first of the queue went in. She came out again almost at once. She had had nothing to confess. The second one was much longer, nearly fifteen minutes. She had, it seemed, like myself, found an opportunity to sin. All the time, though, my eyes were on the Virgin or the blood oozing from the heart of Jesus.

Peace on the surface was profound. The floor on which we knelt had been scrubbed white by generations of nuns and was much worn and uneven. How humble we really were, how lowly. How rough all our upturned hands, how tired our eyes, how sleepy. But then Jesus had been humble, too, Jesus our beloved.

At last, after a great many sighs, it was my turn. I did not bear myself with sang-froid as I emerged from my pew thoroughly alive to my wickedness. I knelt behind the threadbare curtain and said my confiteor, and as I lifted my head I could see the priest, his head

slightly above mine, his eyes in front, silently taking some snuff from a box at his side. *Sniff, sniff*, he went, and then, with a Latin prayer, he indicated that now he, too, was ready. I felt a miserable sinner and my instinct was to flee.

"Yes?" he said, loudly and impatiently.

It was no use starting at the beginning of all the commandments and I went straight to the point.

"I have bitten a piece from an apple," I whispered excitedly.

"You have what?" he whispered back.

And as I repeated my sentence I saw him bend over suddenly, discard his glasses, which he wore for reading, and smile. I was now trembling violently, a little hurt, too, at seeing him smile. It was not proper that I should be peeping through the curtain. It was not done.

"How often did you take a bite from that apple?" he wanted to know.

"Once, your reverence."

"And then, my child?"

"I threw it down."

"Why?"

"Because I was afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"Of being seen by Sister Gabriella."

Then he lifted his hand and stroked his hair. Presently he leaned over a little towards me, and with his shoulder almost touching mine, he said:

“What else, my child?”

Then I told him of my diary. He was silent for a while. I felt that he would like to let it pass, but that, of course, he could not.

“I expect you know it is against the rules?”

“Yes, father.”

“Very well, destroy it.”

And then, without another word about the apple, I was absolved. No wonder, I thought, as I emerged almost swooning with happiness, that the sisters, every one of them, adored him. I found, though, as time went on, that he was not so easygoing.

ON SUNDAY we had the whole of the day before us to spend in prayer, meditation, and recreation. After vespers we gathered in the reception-room, where we had our monthly meetings during which we were told the news of the outside world. The dark, panelled walls were covered with paintings, copies of the masters of the Renaissance: “The Annunciation,” “The Adora-

tion of the Shepherds," "The Fall," "The Creation," and an effigy of a gentle brown-eyed Christ, entitled "Ecce Homo," to which a dusty crown of thorns was pinned. He seemed to be imploring us to pity Him.

We waited for the reverend mother to take the chair on the dais; all of us moderately curious to know what she had to say. We heard no rumours and no scandals from the outside world, and we had begun to suspect that frightening news was usually withheld. Peace, after all, was a precious thing, a thing we valued highly, and which was not allowed to be so wantonly disturbed as it is in the world outside.

The reverend mother arrived at last, followed by her assistant. She stood for a while until there was absolute silence, for we had been allowed to talk, it being Sunday afternoon. Her plump arms folded, her double chin resting on her chest, she stood looking from one to another, missing nothing. She was solemn as a judge. She had her own ideas of discipline. Her power was amazing. Once she stepped down suddenly from her platform, grim in her holiness, and pulled a novice's cap straight here, or removed a cap from a frightened girl's head there, without a word of explanation. She meant well. Perhaps it had been badly laundered by the owner, or a mass of curls had been allowed to stray; whatever it was, it was for the culprit to find the

reason. Sometimes it seemed that there was nothing wrong at all, except that this or that woman was evidently in need of humility. Pride was a sinful thing and so, of course, was vanity. It was not for us young novices to judge. Even though the nuns knew but little about the world they seemed to know human nature. On my right sat Sister Cecilia, who looked deathly pale, and on my left was Stephany, who had apparently changed since she came to the Mystic Rose. She looked ill and gloomy, as though her faith were not implicit.

Sister Cornelia also sat close to me. She, too, had something on her mind. One could not be sure, of course, what it was, for no one ever spoke of themselves. As the reverend mother read some announcements to do with her administration of the estate, and gave a brief outline of the world happenings, I watched their faces. Sister Cornelia looked mostly out of the window, smiling a little, now and then. Stephany looked cold and defiant; she was one of those who found the beginning hardest. The first three months were said to be, usually, the most difficult. Not that I had found it so, nor had Melanie, who looked serenely happy and content. Opposite me in the semicircle sat the girl named Marietta, the girl who, it was said, had privileges. And no wonder. She had brought with her, nearly three years ago, her dowry of over seven thou-



sand pounds in cash. It had been partly spent in buying further land, a huge stretch, which was now called Marietta's Field by every one.

The reverend mother was evidently a thrifty woman. She managed the estate with great efficiency, and her economies, as she now announced, were well rewarded. The estate was doing well, and if our dear Lord willed it to send us these trials of disease and, alas, frequent early deaths, we all had to bow our heads in devout obedience. She also referred to the dear sisters whose minds had gone. They lived mostly by themselves up on the fourth floor and few of us novices ever saw them.

I was conscious of the figures we cut in this dignified, panelled room with our sweaty gowns; a crowd of serious women gazing down upon their work-coarsened hands with gloomy, expectant intentness, hoping for something to happen, or, maybe, with complete indifference, worrying about a backache or the inability to keep awake, a few relapsing into lethargy, and some, the young ones like myself, watching intently what was going on. Sister Pelagia was yawning loudly. She was not interested in a revolution as far away as South America. Perhaps her constant yawns were the fault of our cuisine. Our stomachs, even though they were "denounced," were, alas, still there, and our watery

dinner had consisted of soup, sloppy-looking spaghetti without cheese, and exactly four prunes each.

When the reverend mother had finished, and her assistant had snapped the memorandum book to and we had prayed once more, the fun was supposed to start, for this was, after all, a kind of social. But the Mystic Rose was not a place of gaiety. Sister Ursula went up to the old harmonium and played to us. With extreme accuracy she gave us Handel's *Largo*. We encored, and then she played the *Romance* by Rubinstein. That was a nostalgic tune to play to nuns, and before she had quite finished, Sister Cecilia, looking very pale, rose slowly from her chair, pressed her hands against her throat, and shrieked.

There followed a terrible silence. We novices fled as though we were intruding upon the nuns' privacy and quickly left the room.

"O God . . . O my God!" she then moaned, leaning against the table. "Do you call this peace?"

Slowly she sank to her knees, rolled over on her side, and fainted. Two young sisters started to weep loudly, and all the others quickly crossed themselves.

"Be quiet . . . you," said the reverend mother to those who showed signs of hysteria. "Take her out of this, at once."

Then she herself helped to lift the heavy Dutch-

woman, and six of them carried her across the passage to the *apotheke* and the horse-hair sofa. Every one stood alone now, silently looking out of the many windows into the falling darkness. Outbursts like these were not uncommon, and they were most upsetting, especially to us novices. Snow was falling softly against the window-panes. "Like wet feathers," Sister Cornelia, who always mystified me, said with a smile.

Sister Cecilia's cell was not far from mine, and on the night following the scene downstairs, we knew, as if an angel had announced it, that something further was to happen soon. We were waiting for another outburst but none came. All we heard as we lay in bed was the cobbler's pipe, trilling and warbling from the distance. We all heard that. It seemed as though it was the pipes of Pan. Not that there was anything wrong in the innocent warbling which came floating from the distance across the wintry garden from his lodging above the stables. Yet it was most disturbing. It was worldly and it was beautiful, and our thoughts grew worldly, too.

The lights were switched on again in the dormitories. We heard footsteps, the footsteps we had all been waiting for. Father Anthony's, and the staccato ones of the reverend mother. They were on their way to Sister Cecilia's cell, where she was being tended by

Sister Hedwig, who was applying cold compresses of vinegar and water to her head. We listened to the murmuring of their voices, the infinitely cold voice of the priest, the hissing remarks of the reverend mother, and the whimpering replies of Sister Cecilia. None of us could sleep. The devil was abroad. He was about everywhere; in the very silences, as well as in the cobbler's piccolo. The priest was praying now, his voice grew gentler as he prayed.

"Oremus omnipotens Sempiterna Deus salus aeterna credentium: exaudi nos pro infirma famula Tua," he pronounced.

We all prayed until we heard him use the sprinkler as he blessed her cell, and, on his way out, the dormitory, with holy water.

"Dominus vobiscum," said his voice as he passed my door.

"Et cum spiritu tuo," we all replied instinctively.

For three days and three nights Sister Cecilia had to remain in bed, emerging eventually from her cell looking whiter than ever, self-conscious, and shockingly meek.

SOME of the older nuns said that they saw a flash above them on the ceiling as the priest exorcized the Prince of Darkness. I saw nothing of the kind, but then my cell had a skylight, and I could only see a few stars between some flakes of snow, the same old distant and pitiless stars. Long did we remember that night, for we felt more than usually subdued and exhausted. We did not blame Sister Cecilia for her outbursts. None of us could be so sure of ourselves. People in the world outside might think that they could have gone on living as we did, and never let themselves down like that, and retain their rational mentality. But ours, in the light of nature, was not a rational life at all. That was understood even by ourselves. We were there to renounce the world. It was not so simple as all that.

After this incident I could not help keeping my eye on Sister Cecilia. She made me feel afraid. She was so strong and powerful a woman, the peasant type. One could so well imagine her with children round her knees. I watched her bending over her tiny wash-hand basin, washing herself, like most of us, without stripping, just her face and her neck, leaning carefully

over her bowl of icy water, brushing her teeth with an ancient brush from which almost all the bristles had gone, dipping it into a glass, rubbing it over a cake of cheap soap, and then turn round sharply, almost spitefully, looking at every one in turn. She looked fanatical now, there was something in her once so placid eyes, a tendency, I was sure of that, towards obsession. Then she turned again and wiped the soap froth from her mouth and dashed into her habit with tremendous energy. She had plenty of vitality, too much for a nun. It was in the air around her wherever she was, and in all her movements. Yet, in spite of this animal strength of hers, one felt that if one spoke to her of intimate things she would burst into tears. We all sensed it, more or less. For I saw others watching her, with morbid interest, out of the corner of their eyes. None of us spoke of her, of course, but we were wondering. Yet during the services, and also in the incredibly stuffy sewing-room during the afternoons, she seemed calm enough, and patiently she threaded the fine silks, which clung so aggravatingly to her work-coarsened hands, through the costly satin as she worked the roses on to the priests' vestments, a little erratically sometimes and mixing the colours unwisely. She looked almost gentle then, and greatly resigned for so young a woman. When I saw the face of the reverend mother as

she, too, sat in the room with us designing a stole with sprigs of wheat and bunches of grapes, I knew that she did not trust Sister Cecilia. She, too, was watching her; she, too, was not deceived by her apparent calm. She knew that Sister Cecilia was in a dangerous state of mind. Others, she knew by experience, had been in similar states, but Cecilia was different, she was more animal. And she was Dutch, a stranger here.

As I sat there doing some fine needlework with Stephany sitting silently at my side, Stephany the proud, whose will Sister Gabriella tried to break by humiliating her at every opportunity, I wondered what went on inside all these women's heads. As there was so much silence imposed upon us it gradually became a habit. One would have thought that being alone so much with one's thoughts, one's soul, it would be almost impossible for any of us to open our mouths without saying something deep and profound. But it was not so. People grow simple when much alone. Profound things are simple, too, every one knows that; but our simplicity was that of a child. Remarks like these were common: "I wonder what He will think of it," referring to Jesus and His possible opinion on a beautiful altar-cloth. Or: "Shoo, shoo, get out with you," referring to the devil, who was frequently looked upon as a naughty little boy, a kind of poltergeist, who was

for ever spending his time in our convent hiding our thimbles and reels of cotton, dropping our scissors noisily, or slipping our needles between the floor-boards, trying very hard indeed, and quite in vain, of course, to make us lose our tempers.

The following days were easier. Winter had been difficult, as it kept us cooped up so much. Although I was happy or even inspired, life at the Mystic Rose had often seemed strange, different from what I had imagined, but I was certain that soon all would grow more familiar.

But amid this peacefulness, Sister Cecilia went mad. We had been browsing indoors for weeks because of the snow. No horses were whipped up to plough, no more gathering of fruit in the open. The snow reminded us of our childhood, and so our minds drifted back, which, for many, was a bad thing. Something was for ever whispering, be it only the wind or the rain or the siren of the distant ferry-boat as it left twice a day to cross the lake. There were also the sounds in our dormitory, a brief moan here, a cry there. Then came that terrible, that awful and never-to-be-forgotten shriek of Sister Cecilia as she went mad. We all rushed from our beds, and it took eight of us to hold her down until Sister Hedwig came, who spoke to her as calmly as one speaks to someone in a fever, and then led her



way to the upper house into a padded room. She was lucky, though, Sister Cecilia. She was sent back to her native Holland into a nunnery there, where it was said she recovered her sanity. She had, the reverend mother said, merely suffered from claustrophobia.

As dawn came and we heard the first cocks crow we slipped on our vests, those of us who had removed them, for it was cold in our dormitory, and with a feeling of relief partook of Christ again. It was the greatest moment of the day. But we could not forget Sister Cecilia, and as we trooped back from Communion we all glanced up at those barred windows at the top of the house from where, when the nights were warmer, we had often heard mad cries.

It was an unlucky winter. The reverend mother was worried because two young bulls had been taken ill with foot-and-mouth disease. That was a serious matter, for the animals had to be shot. A shocked hush fell over the whole of the convent, and prayers were immediately sent up to heaven for the well-being of the rest of the herd. Later, Father Joseph came round with the censer of smoking incense and blessed the stables for the second time that year. Sister Pelagia, one of the carefree, masculine types, with large hands and feet and a queer kind of leer in her callous eyes, went armed with a couple of butcher's knives to divide the car-

casses. With a glint in her eyes she approached the dead beasts, and with the most workmanlike movement she deftly removed the heads and skins, using first one knife and then another, holding each knife in turn between her teeth. It was terrifying to watch. It was fascinating, too. I had never in my life seen a woman so neat and capable of doing a man's job. Was she, I wondered, with a sudden feeling of dizziness, was she a woman at all? Whatever she was, she showed but little sense, for she caught the beasts' infection and very nearly died. Her throat swelled up, and her tongue and mouth grew ulcerated. She was nursed by Sister Hedwig, who cured her with the help of prayers, and by giving her quantities of rose-leaves to chew.

The carcasses were eaten by us all. We all knew, of course, that the beasts had been sick, but we also knew that we were not there to make a fuss or to criticize in any way, but to add another shining pearl to a yet invisible crown. Besides, we were always hungry. No one, as far as I remember, ever made a fuss about anything at all. We were voluntary martyrs and had chosen a life of submission, and any excuse for further martyrdom was always welcome. It was not the first time, by any means, we had eaten a sick beast, but as the stuff was invariably boiled we never suffered any noticeable ill effects.

"Feeling better?" we all teased Sister Pelagia as we passed her cell.

She usually nodded her head quite cheerfully, her eyes shining unusually brightly. Even she, I felt sure, was not without a gleam of divinity. We all liked this simple soul with her slow, masculine, and ruminating mind. She was our "handyman," who knew how to handle any job from manuring to planing wood and repairing taps; from fixing plugs into brick walls to seeing to the central heating. Sun and rain, she was always the same, not too devout, going happily about her work.

She may have been wondering, as she lay there, what good bread and butter tasted like, or some juicy fruit, for she was, alas, still far from being one of the more noticeably "holy nuns," and once I had seen her accepting a whiff of snuff from Father Anthony behind a gooseberry-bush. It was, indeed, as if she did not really care if she was a saint or not.

It was different with us young novices; we tried desperately hard to perfect ourselves, to give up thinking of home, to give up worldly desires, and we told ourselves, again and again, that the past mattered not at all, only the future, and that all eternity was ours. Sister Gabriella saw to that. She gave us the kind of train-

ing which would have fitted us for any hardship in the world.

"I want you," she said frequently, before lessons, "within the next few months to ponder upon the enormous burden and sacrifice which you aspire to of your own free wills. Remember, as yet, you are free. But once you take your vows it will not be allowable for you to withdraw from your purpose. Wherefore there is yet time, think on it. Should you, and I am sure the best of you will, wish to abide by your noble, pious resolve, then, in the name of the Bridegroom, become one of us, one of this noble sisterhood. We are now all of us far removed from a pleasure-seeking, futile world, a tainted world, a world in which nothing can be trusted, a world enfeebled with luxury, a world which thinks it clever to scoff at all that is sacred. How, I ask you, can any one scoff at anything so grave as life? Indeed, life is not to be taken lightly."

Pausing to look down upon our upturned faces, her eyes as hard as jet, she went on praising us a little for our wisdom for being there in search of a civilized environment. Had she only known that it was not wisdom which had brought us there; whatever it was, it was not that. It might have been this "divine folly of youth," search for romance, search for peace, or a kind

of escape from the troubles of "adolescent turmoil." Or maybe we were inspired by St. Francis of Assisi, and, like him, we wanted to become sisters to the moon, to the stars, the fire, the stream, and the twittering birds. Or maybe we wanted to remain untouched by life, as the lilies of the fields; or maybe we wanted to live with a secret sorrow. Whatever it was, it was not wisdom. We were too young for that.

"You," she went on, "raised yourselves above carnal desire, knowing it to be of no account."

"Carnal desire," I thought, as I looked from face to face. We had known precious little of that as yet.

"There is no meaning in it," she shouted. "There is no meaning in most things this misguided world values so highly and stupidly leads its men to war for. These things do not survive. Emperors come and go. Forms of government come and go in rapid succession, and all the time humanity gets no nearer to the truth. It is the world of the spirit that counts. It is poverty and brotherhood alone that will eternally survive. We, you and I, are one with Him. He is the only reality. That, and nothing else, is why we have left mother and father, brother and sister, and have made ourselves free of earthly lusts, free of fame and all possessions. Our bodies will, henceforth, be of no importance to us, so that the soul, the spirit, will have a chance to grow."

Then Sister Gabriella bowed her head and crossed herself. We all bowed our heads and crossed ourselves. Then, looking up at the cross on the wall, she said:

“Thou art fair, O my love, and there is no spot in thee . . . my spouse.”

This poetic prayer, this beautiful sigh, sounded quite incongruous from Sister Gabriella's lips. Stephany, who sat beside me, suppressed a smile. Then speaking to us again, our instructor asked us all to try and remember Him, Him who lived the virgin life, Him who had chosen to be born of a virgin, who had solemnly vowed always to remain a virgin, and would inspire us always to follow His example. Then, quoting from the epistles, she recited solemnly: “For there are eunuchs who were so born from their mother's womb, and there are eunuchs who were so made by man, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven.”

Several of the novices yawned. They were getting bored. Some were of the peasant type, happily grown up in the stables and farmyards of their former homes. “What,” they must have asked themselves, “were eunuchs, anyway.”

“Children,” Sister Gabriella said, and I wished her voice was not so hard, and she conveyed a little humour in her eyes, like Sister Victoria's or Sister Hedwig's, for

instance, or even a little love, like most of the gentler nuns. "Children, God has singled you out. Indeed, already you stand out among women! For you there will be no more fear in life, no fear of destruction, for, indeed, nothing can destroy you now. Nor will there be any need to fear that awful satiety earthly love and earthly possessions create." Then Sister Gabriella bowed her head politely to the cross, as if to an acquaintance, and then prayed again: "May every virtue abound in you, steadfast chastity, guileless purity, and the observance of spiritual discipline. Let us, above all, thank Him humbly for our vocation. Let us deny ourselves to take up the Cross and follow Him whithersoever He goes."

She took *The Imitation of Christ* from her desk and read: "The Love of Thee is a great thing, a love that knoweth no measure, feeleth no burden, counteth no labour, it complaineth not as if the task were impossible, because it believeth that it can, and may, do all things, hence it is able to undertake all and beginneth and completeth many great works, where he that loveth not fainteth and falleth prostrate."

Then quite suddenly she shouted: "Stephany!"

Stephany had been idly scribbling with her pencil and was just about to push a note across in my direction.

"What have you written there?"

We held our breath.

"Nothing of any importance, Sister Gabriella."

"Well then, read it," she commanded.

"I would rather not," said Stephany.

"Read it, I command it," said Sister Gabriella's peppy voice.

"As you wish." Then Stephany rose and coolly read the sentence which she had evidently meant for me alone: "It seems to me their estimate of the importance of what they call purity is exaggerated."

There was an awful silence. A girl named Carlotta tore her glasses from her nose and dropped them loudly on the desk. The patient bovine faces of the peasant novices lit up and blushed.

"You leave the room," she commanded us, "while I speak to Stephany."

Awestruck and wordless we scattered like mice, each to her job according to our time-tables, some into the garden, others to the wash-house, Marietta to give a lesson on the violin to a pupil down at the schools. I went into the kitchen. We liked being in the kitchen best with Sister Victoria, the head cook, and a very bad cook at that. She was so natural and motherly and wanted constantly to protect us from ourselves. She took pity on us too, and let us lick the pans when she had been



cooking tempting dishes for the priests. The kitchen was a vast sort of place, scarcely the spot where one would have looked for peace in preference, for instance, to the little chapel where the Virgin reigned. Yet it was the kitchen, where the brass pans shone so merrily and reflected the fire-light, where we felt most at home, and where Stephany presently appeared, looking paler than ever.

She, too, liked Sister Victoria, with her fat gurgling laugh, a woman who knew, apparently, no secret sorrow; who never spoke of sacrifice or purity or tribulations, a woman who had kept her zest for life, a really healthy nun. "Tell me about your home," she would ask Stephany or myself, when talking was allowed, which, alas, was not often, thus encouraging us to talk of home and parents in a happy, natural way. She obviously did not believe in forgetting the past. She had her own way of recruiting us for the Mystic Rose. She thought it was feeble, once "a body" was inside, to criticize and make comparisons between the reality and what one had imagined it to be. It was not so bad, and compared well with other lives. We could take her word for that. That was if we did not let our egos get in the way. As we sat peeling carrots and potatoes with her, she, too, spoke of the meaning of life, although she was not an educated woman. Happiness, she thought,

was not the kind of thing one imagined in one's early youth, it was a gentle thing, something we did not always recognize until it was too late. Happiness brought peace and calm. Unless it did that it was not happiness. And it was of our own making. And where, she would like to know, could it be found more easily than in a religious life?

It was difficult to know, though, what Stephany thought of it all, and that very afternoon she burst out laughing as the nun during vespers read another chapter on chastity. It was the wrong time for mirth, and Sister Gabriella rose in anger from her seat at the head of the novices' table and ordered her to leave the room and wait for her in the pharmacy. No one ever knew what had happened in the morning between the two. Whatever it was, Stephany had not been humbled as she should.

Shortly after vespers Father Anthony was summoned to the *apotheker*, but he was not in a hurry to come and it was six o'clock before we heard his heavy stride. He was with Stephany an hour and a half, right through Benediction, which was conducted by Father Joseph. Every one was curious and agitated and even envious, and many saw her emerge eventually, a little subdued, carrying a few pieces of cardboard in her hand, pictures of "The Martyrdom of St. Theresa," "The Ascension

of the Virgin," and "The Sorrowing of Mary." These little pictures, we knew, had been blessed and were quite priceless really to have about one's person, between the leaves of one's prayer book, or about one's cell or even one's bed. The Rev. Father Anthony looked none too happy himself as he, too, emerged a little later. It had not been a pleasant job. He was an ascetic, we all knew that, but he was also a kindly man with a well-concealed sense of humour. It was not God's will, perhaps, he must have thought, that all women should be nuns. Nature to some was not always gentle. Besides, he liked Stephany. She was not sentimental and she looked you in the eye if spoken to, and if she answered at all she spoke the truth fearlessly and shockingly, as we now well knew.

After that Sister Gabriella ignored Stephany, ignored her very presence. Nothing was asked of her at lesson time. It was as though she were not there. Whether it gave Stephany any relief was difficult to know. We could not help admiring her. She seemed to be able to hold herself intact, isolated from us all. Often, I was told later in the kitchen by Sister Victoria, that kind made the best of nuns in the end.

Six months had gone by. Easter was over. Christ had risen. It was a lovely spring. But some of us were getting restless. There seemed more of a stir all round. The reverend mother was buzzing about, talking here and there in a low voice, giving orders in the kitchens, in the gardens, in the sewing-rooms, and all the time the penetrating bells were summoning us to pray. Then came the feast of Corpus Christi; another day of jubilation when some youths from the village, our acolytes, walked ahead of our procession, carrying our golden crucifix and swinging the smoking censers. Behind them walked the cobbler in his Sunday best, and the baker carrying the emblem of the Mystic Rose, and behind him the priests carrying the monstrance. We followed singing, kneeling, singing, and marching again. The priests were wearing their white and golden vestments, on which five consumptive nuns had worked for three years, robes whereon were woven the symbols of the efficacies: jewelled crosses, jewelled grapes, and leaves of palms. As the priests and the glittering canopy, which was carried by four nuns still dressed, of course, in their everyday and only garb, wended their way chanting through the portals of the

vegetable garden, up between the parsley- and lettuce-beds, followed by eighty virgins, we seemed to be doing wonders to nature around us as well as to our souls. The world became transfigured for a time.

We reached the appointed place, the grotto, where we knelt down again and once more were blessed. So were the parsley, the lilies of the valley, and the forget-me-nots; the hothouse, the cobbled yard by the stables, the buildings, the wash-house. Pale blue clouds of incense rose up in the calm air to the barred windows on the top floor of the first house, where five moon-faces were staring down at us making signs, the faces of those nuns who had gone childish. Blessed water was sprinkled everywhere by Father Joseph, who looked very red in the face as it must have been unbearably hot beneath his silken robe. Barry, the convent's phlegmatic dog, a St. Bernard, trotted happily behind the procession with an expression of calm and wisdom.

On and on we went, chanting through the cloisters three times in succession, praying, muttering all the time. It was inspiring. It was like a journey, a flight, not of the body, but the soul. And then, little by little, as the time approached for three girls to make their vows before God, the place grew more subdued. It was difficult to know why. It should have been as exciting as the eve of a wedding. Still, the sisters did not rejoice

as I expected them to do, although three white woollen gowns had been made by the consumptive nuns in the incredibly bad air of our over-heated sewing-rooms, and three white cotton veils and three wreaths of artificial orange-blossoms were ready in their lockers, three wedding gowns for three young brides.

The church was set for the occasion. White lilac was placed on the three altars already. For days an elderly and slightly mental nun and I had polished the woodwork in the chapel together. She had talked all the time, although it was during the hours of silence. She could never remember, she said. Nothing, she thought, mattered any more after thirty years at the Mystic Rose, absolutely nothing. One felt sorry, that was all, that all one's pals had already been taken into the arms of our Lord. One missed them and one envied them a little, that was all.

Nothing mattered, it was true, but even now at her age, and she was nearly fifty, the devil sorely tempted her still. He had waited for her in the fields, under the apple-trees, up on the haystack, and in her cell. Mostly there. She was a good talker although she was slightly mental, but her devil did not interest me very much. I had not learned, as yet, to look upon him as a constantly present member of our small community. In fact, he sounded to me like an invention.

“Ah,” she said slyly, as she polished the confessional, “you don’t know yet how he whispers and whispers into your ears in his endearing way!”

I did my best to get away from her, but she followed me round the benches and pews so that I could not escape her sorrowful reminiscences. Once she was so close to me that I felt her breath on my face and, as the wind was moaning and whispering in the tower, I grew a little frightened. I remember well how she beckoned me to follow her into the sacristy, where she began to polish the golden chalice, how she snatched it from me as I reached out for it, offering to do it for her. The wavering gloom of that sacristy, the breathless silence outside, and then the sudden striking of the tower clock and this crazy sister’s yellow face and her mad hands clutching at the chalice which I, who was not yet a nun, had dared to defile by touching it. I felt just a little angry then.

Three beautiful arum lilies had been fostered in the hothouse for the coming brides by Sister Pelagia, who was an expert gardener. And then the day was here at last. The parents of the three young girls arrived. Marietta’s father came first, the man who had been so generous to the convent, and had in a way bought Marietta a safe and sheltered spot on earth. He was a small, stocky man, somewhat hard or even brutal of

expression. He looked as though he knew the worst there was to know about the world and did not want, it seemed, his daughter to live in it.

The other two novices, a healthy Swiss peasant type, were also visited for the last time by their parents, dressed in their black Sunday best. They, too, had come to see their daughters off into complete retirement from life, to an existence of poverty which was amazingly free of all anxiety, to eternal obedience and subjugation of the flesh. Feeling quite evidently ill at ease they were strolling in the garden with their daughters, whom they had not seen for a long, long time. It was quite noticeable that to these visitors from home there seemed already an unworldliness about their daughters, a remoteness from their kin which was not without great poignancy. There was something strained in the old relationship, and one did not quite know what to talk about. Time hung heavy with that sense of final parting in the air, and it was definitely harder for the parents than the daughters. The stained-glass windows which we had been cleaning for days shone with that symbolic beauty of their kind and were greatly admired by the guests.

Watching these humble parents with their daughters I grew depressed; for I, too, thought of my parents and wondered if after all I could inflict this thing on



them. There seemed to me no noticeable eagerness about these girls on the eve of their "Profess," not as there is before a new start or a departure for a longed-for place. This was indeed renunciation. The garden, the bells, the chiming hours were indeed filled with gloom. The nuns went out of their way to be genial to these parents and relations, who were given good meals in the guest room and beds in the priests' house. A few more distant relatives slept at the "Adam and Eve." Yet they felt ill at ease. There was nothing to do after five o'clock and their daughters, who were somewhere near in the flesh, were already far removed in spirit, indeed, as though they were already dead. Besides, there was this haunting silence after vespers. A fortnight's retreat, conducted by Father Anthony, which had preceded the "Profess," had already had its effect and removed the candidates' young minds immeasurably far away from ordinary life.

The day arrived. The church bells rang without ceasing. The sunlight flooded through the stained glass and we passed sightseers and friends of the brides who stood by the archway to see us all go by, and as we glanced at one another we saw tearful faces staring at ours. This was no occasion for tears, of course, among nuns and novices and candidates, solemn though it was, and their faces were calm, some of them like

masks, and we did not in any way respond to those others. Then, at the very end of the procession, their hearts filled with fear, longing, hope, and awe, came the three young women dressed in white, veiled, each carrying a lily and a breviary with a pale blue ribbon hanging from it, and each bearing in her left hand a burning taper.

As they approached the iron gates young men, who had gathered there and even climbed the wall, carefully looked at each passing face and then turned to stare, retreated a few paces as the candidates approached, and then slowly walked away. Perhaps they were merely curious to see what kind of women we were, perhaps they even knew a girl or two. There was no telling.

"How do they know at their age?" I heard one of them saying to another. How, indeed, did we know? I asked myself. The freshly blessed rosary of mother-of-pearl dangling from their wrists, the three girls walked down the aisle to the foot of the altar where they knelt.

His lordship, the bishop of the diocese, a very old man, was present, as well as two village priests who had made the journey from two of the candidates' homes. Marietta, the French girl, looked indescribably beautiful now. She was the only child of this somewhat coarse but sick-looking man, the daughter, it was said,

of a well-known actress, who had long ago run away with another man. This was his revenge, if indeed such it was: his daughter was to know nothing of the sins of the flesh, of which she had, indeed, an exaggerated horror now. She was a little simple, though, and had entered the nunnery and pledged herself to chastity and the peace of death as unquestioningly as a child. Her father had, apart from the seven thousand pounds which he had already given Marietta, made his will in favour of the convent. It seemed to me that he very nearly owned it.

The sun came out a second time and a queer blue air lay inert over the congregation, its blueness partly due to floating incense, and partly to the light filtering through the painted windows. There were five parents there, all of them looking grave as if in pain except Marietta's father, who stood with his arms folded watching the ceremony with interest. One of the mothers sobbed audibly, the other wore an expression of relief and gratitude. She was a peasant and she was poor, and her bony hands were coarse with work. Her back was bent and she was old, prematurely so. Her daughter, no doubt, had chosen a hard life, it was true, but a life infinitely easier than had she married a peasant, such as her father and her brothers were.

I, too, stood watching the three brides, so did Steph-

any, who stood beside me leaning against her white hands, looking incessantly towards the altar where his lordship was now speaking quietly, almost inaudibly, to the girls who were kneeling and had just kissed his ring. They stood there with a gravity that was beautiful to see. Then I heard Marietta say "I will," in a clear, girlish voice, thus dedicating herself to something she could not yet truly comprehend. It was a solemn thing, the most solemn thing imaginable, perhaps the most solemn thing there is, to hear a young girl forever deny the things of the world, of the senses, the sweet ideal of sex, the taste of an apple, even, or the feel of a plunge into the cool water of a river, a lake, or the sea. Then for a long time, apparently, the three brides lay prostrate before the altar, and while the coloured lights played upon their white gowns someone sang the *Magnificat* up in the organ-loft. I myself felt, at this moment, a great longing to go out and stand in the sun.

"Magnificat anima mea Dominum . . . Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae. . . ." Sister Cornelia was singing sweetly.

I wondered what was going on in Stephany's mind. She seemed to be fascinated by the ceremony. I had wondered many times why she had written that note during lessons, and why she had wanted to hand it to

me. We were not really intimate. We had hardly ever spoken to each other. But, then, no one ever spoke about herself, and perhaps we could be intimate without it. And now we were all carried away by this unusual ceremony and I wanted to walk out into the open. I wanted to know exactly what a ceremony like this would seem like if viewed from the outside world. It was so easy when leading a one-sided life to lose one's sense of proportion. I was afraid of being carried away. But then I had wanted it so, and this attitude was wrong. I felt convinced that no one else would harbour such thoughts at so sacred and gripping a moment as this. I felt sure that if Marietta, who looked as white as the lily in her hand, or the two peasant girls, stolid and insensitive, had analysed their step or even described it to themselves and secretly entered it into a diary, they would not have stood there now. Or would they? "O God," I prayed, "please give me, too, a true vocation."

At last the ceremony was over and the brides turned to leave the altar, and we all walked out once more into the sun. Once more a group of young men stood peering over the wall near the gate. It was a rare sight for them, I suppose, to look into the trusting eyes of three young girls who had just sworn to give themselves to Jesus. And so we were walking in the shadow of the

wall in a world of unreality, whereas they were on the sunny side, in a world of barbarism, of competitiveness, of brutality, and greed. It was fantastic.

Sister Gabriella walked in front of me, her hooked beak of a nose nearly meeting her prominent chin, her fierce eyes darting everywhere. What a contrast between her and gentle Marietta, who had been given a new name and was now Sister Monica, Marietta who might have married a young knight or more likely given herself to a hard-faced, pot-bellied, money-making business man like her father. There were so many, alas, of that type in the outside world. Instead of this, I mused, she would retain the innocence of a child until she slowly faded out, possibly become tubercular and die young. There was something inexpressibly, touchingly young and naïve on her classical features as she entered the convent at the head of the procession, the two peasant girls, with charming gravity, following behind, their brown eyes as timid as a fawn's. Then came the nuns, swaddled in too many clothes and muffled to the eyebrows, followed by the portly bishop and the equally portly village priests and then our own ascetic Father Anthony. Behind him walked the peasants, fathers, mothers, cousins, and even uncles of the brides, more fatalistic, I guessed, than childlike or trusting. How still the air was; nothing stirred at all,

neither the trees nor the curtains by the open windows. This strange quiet seemed a part of that curious feeling of finality that was in me. It was not, I think, a feeling shared with others. The general atmosphere that day inside the convent was more joyful. It almost became contagious. Even the parents shared in it as they were ushered into the dining-room, where they would soon be breaking bread for the last time in this life with their daughters, who were now nuns and had all been given other names. The guests, the priests stood decorously about in different parts of the room admiring, or at any rate gazing at, the "Mystic Rose" and the fascinating clock beneath the old glass case. With their habitual veneration the peasants spoke to the uncouth village priests of their crops and the effects of the weather. Sister Bonaventura brought several huge decanters of red wine from the cellar and soon the atmosphere became even more cheerful. The three brides, still dressed in white, put their drooping Madonna lilies into a vase which they set on the altar of the Mystic Rose. They also placed their tapers in the Roman candlesticks and left them to burn themselves out slowly. I can still see Marietta standing by that altar holding the tall white vase in both her hands, the sunlight on her veil and hair. There seemed to me a

loneliness in that scene, a sadness, which, perhaps, existed only in my mind.

In the dining-room the parents were discussing daughters, the wisdom of their decisions, trying to cheer each other up. Even the French-Italian, Marietta's father, was joining in, telling them how well educated Marietta was, how she could have married anyone . . . but that marriage was not everything. "To the best life there is," then broke in one of the priests, who wore hobnailed boots apparently made of rhinoceros hide and a very ill-cut suit, holding his glass high above his head.

"To the best life there is," the peasants echoed him, a little less convinced.

Then Sister Bonaventura and I served their dinner, river trout, chicken, jugged hare, and still more wine. In a way it reminded me of a funeral feast.

"The day will come," said one of the hobnailed priests, "when, in this age of materialism, all thinking people will thus retire from the world. It's the only kind of life that has any meaning left."

He sat down looking flushed and the others applauded a little. They were to rejoice, his lordship the bishop had said during his sermon earlier; yet somehow, even though one was devout, one could not.



Nuns frequently died young. There was no denying that. And they almost invariably died of tuberculosis. Even the peasants knew that. But then it was God's will. Was not there the saying that those whom God loved died young?

Soon the decanters were empty and every one stepped out into the garden into the dazzling sun. There was nothing more to be said or done. It was clearly time for every one to go. Father Joseph came trotting along and gave each peasant a souvenir of the day, a highly inartistic print of a girl making her vows before an altar, with an inscription below it and the date written in ink. As I watched the little scene below in the garden, the handing over of these worthless prints, bought by the reverend mother by the gross, I grew conscious for the second time that day of my critical attitude and once more I sighed: "O God, give me, too, a vocation."

Then they parted. They barely said good-bye. The parents shook hands with their daughters, quite formally, for the girls were now nuns and kissing was against the rules. It was good-bye for ever, yet to an onlooker it appeared as casual as though they were merely parting for the day. The parents just went, their footsteps dying away in the distance until they turned a corner by the cemetery gates, while their daughters

resolutely turned their backs on those whom they loved and would never see again.

It was the most saddening thing to see. Marietta, as she walked back to the house, lifted her hand and quickly wiped away a tear. The other two, with the fatalistic courage of peasants, were dumb. And so they closed the door behind them and began to read their breviaries.

Presently the aged bishop, a little weary of life it seemed, withdrew from the convent where he had been conversing and dining alone with the reverend mother, and walked across to Father Anthony's abode to have a nap. The sightseers who had been sitting above the portico scattered at once as they saw him approach, and the two peasant priests with their heavy mountain boots clattered down the asphalt drive, and by the church door crossed themselves politely without, however, paying their respects to the Virgin Mary within. Still a little flushed with wine they hurried on to catch the train. The happy, carefree glow on their faces contrasted with the pale misery on those of the parents who still lingered by the church as though they could not bear to leave the scene. After taking holy water by the door they walked down the aisle of the now empty church, and pressed their cheap cardboard souvenirs against the miracle-working statue of the Virgin, and

then they, too, reluctantly departed. They also had to catch their train.

The church seemed very empty now as I ran across on an errand. I was to look for a handkerchief his lordship the bishop had lost. Now it was getting cooler outside, and a thrush was already singing Benediction. Inside, the church was quite dark already, and only the oil lamp was burning there. One could still smell the clothes the peasants had worn, whiffs of naphthaline, mothballs mingled with incense. I felt proud of having been sent upon an errand which brought me into the "Presence." We always were. Besides, it was always a treat to be really alone for a while. I went into the sacristy and there, inside a glass case, shining brightly, was the golden chalice which we novices were not allowed to touch. I quickly opened the door, from which the key was hanging, and put my hand on it. I did not know why exactly. It seemed a childish thing to do, but I felt much happier after that. I knew God would not mind. Then, half-hidden by a pillar in the shadows, I saw a man leaning forward against a pew. It was Marietta's father.

"Mademoiselle," he said, beckoning me. He had a gracious smile, but that came and went in a flash. "You perceive," he said, "that I have come a long way to see my daughter take the veil. What I would really like to

do now is to go away in peace."

"Of course, monsieur," I nodded brightly.

"Well," he went on, "before I go, tell me, what kind of food do they really give you here?"

I did not know how and what to answer.

"We get enough, monsieur . . . besides, monsieur, we don't think much about food. Indeed, we don't."

"Ah, you don't? I thought as much. It's stupid, but I had never thought of that before, not until now."

He seemed somewhat unhappy. He had wanted a great ideal for Marietta, and now he was not certain if she had enough to eat. Once more I tried to assure him on that point. He then muttered to himself and I walked away, catching odd words like "ignorance" and "if not too late." As he saw me leave the church he called me back.

"Mademoiselle, you are a capable little woman," he said, "any one can see that. Keep an eye on Marietta."

But as the church bell was ringing he could not catch my answer. It seemed funny, though, for this was the second father who had appealed to me thus in a belated kind of panic. By the statue of St. Michael nearest to the door I found the bishop's handkerchief and ran back with it to the convent.

If only these people knew how doubtful, how lonely I felt at times, I thought. What was there indeed that

I could do to help any of them? Besides, they did not need my help. Marietta least of all. She accepted everything and she was not a little favoured because of her father's donations. Then I thought of Stephany, whose "false pride" left her no peace, and gentle Melanie who, like the rest of us, had to find her own salvation.

Once more we all went back to church. There were no sightseers now on the wall and Sister Gonzaga, the one who had visions, locked the cemetery gate through which every day on our way to church we glimpsed rows of rusting iron crosses. Poor Gonzaga, whose duty it was to look after and wait on those nuns up on the fourth floor. Well over twenty times she climbed the sixty steps up to the asylum, always laden with one thing or another. It was time she was released from so sad a job. But no one cared. The reverend mother was too busy managing the whole estate. She gladly left us all to God. Sister Gonzaga wore a scapulary near her heart, and as she knelt in front of me she would sometimes touch it with the tips of her fingers. It, too, had been pressed against some holy relic, once, a very long time ago. The ancient little organ was now thundering out a psalm with much *spirito*. Sister Juliana was putting all her energy into the instrument: "Oh, keep Thou our souls from schemes of crime, . . . Purgemus omne pessimum . . . " and then the great occasion

with its rather sad finale was over. His lordship the bishop had been driven off by car with his handkerchief. Father Anthony had gone along with him as well. He needed a rest after the extra work the "Profess" had entailed and his fiery sermons during the retreat, when he had preached of heaven and hell, hereditary sin, and the separation of wheat from chaff. Now Father Joseph was praying quietly, as was his way, and there were no more tears among the congregation. The enemies of the Church had been cursed in the morning, so had the enemies of chastity, and now there was peace. We, too, were tired, and the "Children of Mary" and the "Brides of Christ" were quietly and restfully fingering their beads, their minds a very pleasant blank. The day ended with a very special treat, a huge slab of gingerbread for each with our cup of coffee; and then, with the *Ave Maria* still in our ears, we went to bed.

The day was not quite ended yet for the three brides or newly ordained nuns. After the rush of the day was over they were shepherded into the dark pharmacy by Sister Hedwig. She was the kind of nun every one adored because she had that strength which was beyond doubts, beyond religion really, beyond any kind of weariness. She opened the glass cupboard and took from it a rubber apron and a pair of barber's scissors

and then, one by one, the three little brides sitting on the horse-hair confessional had their heads shorn like convicts. Sister Hedwig was quite an expert at it, she had done it many times before. Soon Marietta's beautiful fair plaits fell onto the floor and mingled with the coal-black curls of the other two. They did not seem to mind, the peasant girls treated it as a joke. "What if Ma could see me now, ha, ha!" Indeed, why should they have minded? It was, after all, a privilege, a reason for further exultation. It was part of the purifying, the cleansing which had been their day. Looking like three young childish acolytes they stood in a row, staring at one another and trying to get a reflection of themselves in the glass-case door. They looked absurdly young and pitiful and uncorrupted, Marietta with her gold and porcelain beauty and the two local girls holding their heads down once more for a few final snips of the scissors. The latter were noticeably more resigned to it than Marietta, being of the docile peasant class. Then they were dressed in the black habit of the Order by Sister Martha, the dressmaker, who had a cough. First came the heavy and lined gown, four yards wide, which fastened down the front, with plenty of deep seams that would let out if they grew fatter in later years; then a cape reaching to the hips, completely covering the figure. Then followed a white

cap, which was tied underneath the chin and completely hid the forehead, the ears, and the contour of the cheeks. Over that a starched hood was pinned, and round the neck a stiffly starched white collar was buttoned at the back; and then came the veil, a piece of black cloth a yard and a half wide, which was pinned over the hood and hung down at the back, reaching to the calves. Dressed in this they suddenly looked much older. Now they were no longer Marietta, Doris, and Ann, but Sister Maria Monica, Sister Maria Anselma, and Sister Maria Catharina. It was not easy at first to carry all these bits and bobs on the face and neck, and one felt a little ill at ease and one's mind could not help slipping ahead, for it would now always be like that. Never more to feel the wind in the hair or the rain-drops on the forehead! Looking radiant though, for it had been their day, aware of their new dignity and their own new strength, they went next door into the chapel to say good night to Jesus. They were now united with Him for always. On the altar stood their lilies and at the side their tapers were rapidly dying down.



AND then there came bath day. At the end of the garden by the grotto were some brick buildings whose windows were continually steamed up. Those were the wash-houses. For some reason or other those who were on duty there, enveloped in soapy steam, often sang. Fatherland songs sometimes, in between hymns, were flung to the skies by a dozen or so hot-looking nuns still wearing the clothes described in the previous chapter. I shall always remember the voices of these invisible women floating from the steamed-up windows until vespers, when with the stroke of a bell their singing died down and they emerged, perspiring, their faces flushed, to hurry to the chilly chapel. Every three months, exactly on the first day, eighty odd nuns and novices passed to and fro beneath the sewing-room windows to have a bath. There were three chilly brick compartments not unlike a slaughter-house, each containing a galvanized iron tub which we should all presently enter, covered from neck to knee in a black calico bathing costume, which we were solemnly pledged to wear, even though we were alone behind locked doors, for the sake of purity. There was no telling what pagan speculations might have haunted our minds had we

remained completely naked. On bath day we were all in a very happy mood indeed, happier, strangely enough, than on any other day. Bathing was unspeakably exciting.

Sister Benedicta, however, the French nun, the "mistress of the bath," was invariably cross as, with an enormous watch in her hand, she stood outside our doors and timed us. Four minutes each, that was the rule. Not that Sister Benedicta was not sympathetic. She, too, would have enjoyed a longer bath and a better one than this. Our instincts in this were correct and all alike, and it was not without a feeling of guilt that some of us produced the wet costume for her inspection. Poor Sister Benedicta thus sat in speechless boredom for twelve solid hours, stoking up the fire, refilling baths, and inspecting costumes, her eyes on the watch, calling out: "Time, please." There were no incidents nor were there ever any arguments. No one ever ran amuck. There had been a deputation once, just a handful of nuns had astonished every one by marching *en bloc* to the office, immodestly advocating more frequent bathing. It had suddenly occurred to them that it was not enough, but they were gently reminded of the example of the saints in the past who had succeeded in forgetting the existence of their bodies altogether, and the deputation had left the office

humbled and ashamed. It is, as can be seen, quite wrong to say that nuns never bathe or, as the legend goes, they bathe in milk.

One beautiful spring day, many of us sat under the shadows of the chestnut-trees preparing gooseberries for making into jam, which we would be selling presently in bright blue pots. The house looked quite deserted in the noonday heat. Many sisters were working further afield, and some were sewing in the cloisters. Sister Pelagia, now quite well again, came lolloping down the path with two dead rabbits, which she had ensnared, slung over her shoulders, pushing a creaking wheelbarrow in front of her filled with seedlings from the hothouse. She looked like an old cart-horse with a glint in its eyes. She was, indeed, a very happy nun. So, when I got to know her better, was Sister Bonaventura, the Italian nun, who opened the door to me on the day of my arrival. She always showed a tendency to hilarity, and she always seemed to be on sentry-go. Nothing escaped her notice. She was carrying a *soufflé* from the pantry to the guest-room for a visiting priest, and cruelly lifted it up for me to sniff at. Then she danced a measure, pretending to be Salome carrying the head of John the Baptist on a salver. The *soufflé*, she said, was for Father Norbert, a monk who was sent to the Mystic Rose by his monastery to recu-

perate after a nervous breakdown.

He lived with Father Anthony across the compound. It was said that he, too, was an ascetic, that is, he was not, like some others, preoccupied with thoughts of food. He had already twice refused some dainty tempting dishes which the nuns had so proudly, so fussily, and so stupidly set before him. He had preached to us on Sunday morning. It had been most exciting, all of us listening to him with more than half a mind, while he whipped up our emotions without feeling any himself. Young as he was, he had, it was said, already gained over three hundred converts, although his steely-grey eyes held neither warmth nor sympathy. It was a constant wonder to me how he did it. Sheer rhetoric, I supposed. For a whole hour he had offered us his dream of heaven, a place for the lowly, the humble, the pure, and the chaste . . . and the hungry.

God knows we were all of those. That was, indeed, most comforting; yet I could not for the life of me imagine Father Norbert up in heaven. One felt that there he would be at a loss, filled as he was with missionary zeal and so much bottled-up vitality. There was always—most gratifying to a preacher—someone sobbing loudly as he preached, or as he chastised us with words.

"Bow your heads," he had shouted suddenly, as though he were God Himself. So we all bowed our heads as he thundered on, not daring to look up at him any more. "If thou wilt be perfect, go . . . go . . . and sell what thou hast . . . and come and follow me . . . Ah! . . . to how many, TO HOW MANY, I ask you, was such a choice offered by our Lord, who calls unto Him whom He will? Indeed, many are called . . . but few are chosen."

We were still bowing our heads, yet very curious to watch him. There was only the voice of this amazing, tall young man who did not like being put out by a mass of women's upturned faces. He had, indeed, a noble countenance, and he knew the truth and did not care at all for the uncertainties of others, their doubts, or personal opinions; they were welcome to them, if they preferred them. So, doubly convinced that we were truly chosen, we returned to our work in a kind of trance, digesting what he had said, and repeating some of it to ourselves and each other in the sewing-room. No doubt Father Norbert, being an unfathomable young man, was yet to leave a great and lasting impression on us all.

We had spent all the winter in that sewing-room and many of us hated it, since it jutted across the cloisters into the cemetery. There was too much peace. The

very peace of the graves peeped in at the windows and entered our beings. We often felt like laying down our work and going out in the open to contemplate in idleness; but we went on stitching with hot hands, trying always to do everything well and beautifully. However, it was spring now, and we were working out of doors at last, and Sister Bonaventura could be heard singing to high heaven: "Je veux entendre le frémissent des ailes des anges à ma mort," while she polished the cutglass ware which had been used for Father Norbert, who was about to depart. Alas! He had been exciting. In the privacy of Father Anthony's study he had painted two enormous pictures, which had just been brought across to the convent to be hung in the whitewashed passage leading from the first house to the upper house, between the statues of St. Philomena and St. Catharina. Sister Pelagia had just been fetched in from transplanting antirrhinums to plug the wall. It did not take her long. Stephany and I helped her lift the heavily gilt-framed pictures, and then we all stood back and looked, and closed our eyes and looked again. None of us spoke. We were a little overawed. In a bed of bluebells sat a Madonna, and dancing on her knees was a chubby boy, completely naked, and, of course, completely unself-conscious. The Madonna, in spite of her halo, was laughing as an ordinary mother would.

Her cheeks were rosy and her lips were full, her neck, her arms, were bare. It was a fine piece of work, but then Father Norbert had once been an artist, before, for some private reasons of his own, he had renounced the world, a world which, to judge by these paintings, must have been beautiful to him. Other sisters came tripping down the passage and stood to look and caught their breath. Their silence seemed most eloquent, their hoods and veils were quivering with astonishment. Then moving cooly to where the second painting hung they looked and gasped again. Although it was early afternoon, and silence not yet imposed, no one offered an opinion. Clearly the nuns were feeling ill at ease. Pelagia grinned and walked away, swinging a hammer in her brawny fist. The second Madonna was the same as the first, the same type of young and vigorous-looking woman. She stood upright now, still in a bed of bluebells, her limbs outlined clearly beneath her white gown, an expression of delight on her face, delighted evidently with life and her naked baby, so pure and golden beneath the aura of her halo, tenderly holding out her hands to the bronzed Child, her skin glowing with rich apricot tints.

The nuns stood immobile, their arms folded. No one had anything to say. It was as though they had already lost all their individuality. Sister Cornelia,

who looked very sick by comparison, glanced up and then sadly walked away. Others came along and there was much suppressed excitement. The question arose in each of their minds: "Who could have been the model?" Then there was the question of the Holy Child. It was completely naked. Obviously so. The picture was a revelation and did much to counteract Father Norbert's sermons. It was Life. It made one long for life, glorious life. It was haunting, it was exquisite. It was innocent, too, because it was so simple. But it was not what one would have expected from the missionary.

Still more sisters came to stare, and the contrast was inexpressibly touching; the sun-drenched woman on the canvas, and those others, their pale eyelids lowered, too timid, too much afraid to praise.

Then, with a tremendous swishing of skirts, the reverend mother appeared on the scene, and behind her her shadow, the assistant mother. She removed her wire spectacles and, after a short glance, she turned to us.

"Where is Sister Pelagia? Fetch her at once."

She glanced but once more at the picture in front of her, and then looked at me and told me to get myself some work to do. Sister Pelagia came slithering along, trying to tread softly, looking not unlike a good-



natured beast of burden. She was carrying the step-ladder. The last I saw as I turned the corner by the fountain was the paintings being carefully lowered again. For several days we all wondered what had happened to Father Norbert's farewell gift. The plugs were still there on the blank, white wall. And then quite suddenly they were back again, the same, but not the same. The Christ-Child was naked no more. It was clothed, well and warmly, if unbecomingly, in a dark-blue bathing-suit, cunningly applied and varnished over by Sister Gabriella, who, too, was a painter of sorts. Later, when the sun shone on to the scene of an afternoon, the addition stood out clearly in the light, and had a way of reminding us all of the indecency of nudity which always troubled us profoundly.

As it was summer time we constantly heard the distant hooting of outward-bound steamers. It was like the call of the world without; a challenge to us younger ones. On bright days we could see from the roof of the convent the passengers standing on deck in gay summery clothes, the kind of clothes we used to wear when we were still like them. But now we had escaped from

ordinariness behind these walls, and wisely stored up privileges for a future in another world. Still, we had not yet lost all interest in those men and women moving about outside; those sightseers and picnickers outside the gates, and those that came rowing by in boats, young men in open shirts, singing, their Adam's apples moving up and down. We could always hear the splashing of their oars. But we had little time for them. We were never for a single moment idle. There were ninety pairs of galoshes to be cleaned once a week by me between ten and eleven, and each pair put back in its proper place. I was busy one day with this boring task when Sister Cornelia came along whispering: "Let me sit down awhile." She had barely said it when she collapsed in a little heap of black on the floor. I ran for water. As I returned, however, she opened her eyes.

"Don't tell them," she said, "I often get like that."

Then she began to cry, desperately trying not to. But there was no time for tears, for the bells were ringing for the Angelus, and we had to scurry. Sisters were popping in and out of doors, hurrying down passages, to get, if possible, to their allotted places for the prayers. Then, after ten minutes, every one was back at work again. So we came and went, doing tasks by the clock, being always spared the need of thought. Someone out of sight in the office was doing all the

thinking. There was authority, someone in control. It left us blissfully free of care.

The reverend mother was quite friendly if there was no slacking going on anywhere or wasting of material either in the kitchen or the sewing-room. She was very reserved, of course, we all were that, and yet in spite of it the place seemed to hum with thought, with the intimate knowledge we all had of each other; of Sister Pelagia, for instance, who was so fond of killing, who had knelt down during the Angelus on her way to the stables, caressing a light-brown cockerel whose neck she was about to wring, holding him tightly pressed against her chest. Also we all saw Stephany getting thinner and paler, and we saw Sister Gabriella watching her, watching all the time, humiliating her because she could not learn her English verbs, humiliating her because she was a baroness and needed to be taken down a peg or two. We were all mystified as well by Sister Cornelia, who had never become friendly with any one, who was so aloof, whose secret smile had gone, and with it some of her resources. We knew that her face was flushed, that she coughed quite frequently, and that her hands were as white as the candles she usually lit in chapel. We saw how Sister Anselma, who was only forty-four, grew more childish day by day, moving her flabby lips incessantly, emptily; how she

dragged herself along, shuffling in her home-made slippers, rapidly losing the last glimmer of her intelligence. We all knew that Sister Bonaventura was born in the slums of Genoa, where she had been rescued and taken from her mother who had been a prostitute, and wondered why she was always so gay, her brown eyes darting here and there. We knew that she had never properly submitted, cheating a little, here and there, quite openly. It was so easy to be a rogue among virtuous women. We knew that she argued with the priests as she served their meals, in a way no one would have dared, and that she frequently made them laugh. The reverend mother had twice wanted to replace her in the dining-room, but Father Anthony had refused to have her shifted. And he, when all was said and done, seemed to rule the roost. We also knew that the cobbler was living in sin. Night after night we saw him creeping from the back door out into the stable yard as though up to no good, looking this way and that way, and when any of us met him, and his eyes met ours, we knew that he knew we knew he was up to no good. Yet, good Catholic that he was, he always knelt at the back of the church with a rusty rosary dangling from his hairy hands. But even when he lifted his eyes as we passed him he had a buttoned-up look on his swarthy face. We also knew that on Saturdays and Sundays

sightseers came to our church to make fun of it, laughing at the artificial roses, the feminine knick-knacks, the monstrous libel of St. Joseph with the marceled hair and the insipid face, and our electric-blue ceiling with the yellow stars, our fretwork, our gaudy Stations of the Cross. We knew all that, and most of us did not care. I did, though. How dared they, I thought, with their cheap ideas of love, their extraordinary conceit, their cheap way of pulling things to pieces? It used to make Father Anthony cross as well. He would walk briskly up and down outside the portals apparently reading his breviary, muttering under his breath, looking anything but gentle. Sometimes he would pause at the church door to look in, seeing that the trippers behaved themselves. And sometimes an army of soldiers would march by, with the band playing one of Sousa's immortal tunes. It would echo against the convent walls and disturb our silence, and some of us would feel very restless then.

ONE summer day almost every one had gone in a band to make hay, a mile or two away, the nuns praying as they walked, the hot sun beating down upon their over-

dressed bodies as they marched up the dusty road in galoshes. I had remained behind to polish the carved furniture in the reception room and to wipe the dust from the elaborate frame of the Mystic Rose, when suddenly the door-bell rang, echoing loudly from passage to passage. This bell was rung only rarely, for we had few callers, and for some reason or other it always made our hearts beat faster when we heard it.

A moment later Sister Bonaventura showed a visitor into the room, and I quickly gathered my beeswax and the rest of my paraphernalia and made ready to leave.

The visitor who stood by the table looked like a gentleman farmer. He was wearing riding-breeches and looked rather menacing about the mouth. As I passed him he glanced up and said: "Don't mind me, go on with your job." Then, as I renewed my polishing, he came up to me and watched me.

"And what's your name?" he asked.

And then when I told him he wanted to know if I knew Sister Elisabeth. Oh, yes, I remembered Sister Elisabeth, a very sickly nun she was, young, too, and very shy.

"I am her father," he said, and I very nearly smiled. It seemed impossible that this bully of a man should have begotten so gentle, so colorless, so saintly a girl. Once more his face hardened about the mouth and the

eyes and I felt that something was about to happen. There was a tenseness in his manner, and the man, I was sure, looked quite capable of making a row. It was almost exciting.

"I've come to take her away," he said. Just like that. Quite simply, as though it was a usual thing to do. He stood there, feet wide apart, mouth set, eyes glaring, masterful. In his left hand, behind his back, he held a riding-whip. He was quite noticeably in a rage, glaring at me and then glaring at the Mystic Rose with an expression of intense dislike. I went on polishing.

"Someone," he went on after a long silence, "I don't know who, sent me a letter. Anonymous. . . . Said my daughter Joan, you know her name was Joan, not Elisabeth of course, was tubercular, and it would be as well that I should know."

I was horrified. It was inconceivable that any one should write a letter from the Mystic Rose. For one thing, none of us had any paper or even postage stamps for that.

Then I remembered the pupils at the school; they had been known to do things like that, especially as they were now away from school on holiday. Rarely though, and only if they were very fond of one of their teachers.

"She is a gentle one, Joan is," the farmer went on, "and deep. Like my wife. But I am hanged if I'll let them murder her in here," he thundered.

Then I remembered how ill Sister Elisabeth had looked lately. Her father, I reckoned, would be shocked if, indeed, they would let him see her. It was completely against the rules. He had not, he said, seen her for seven years. That was a long time in the life of a young woman. I went on with my work while he stood looking out of the window, jingling the money in his pocket, breathing rather loudly.

At that moment the door opened and the reverend Mother Superior entered in state, so to speak, her hands folded across her stomach, a slight gleam in her snapping eyes, quite ready, it seemed, for battle. Behind her followed her assistant and Sister Augusta, the prefect of the schools. She was, after all, not going to face the man alone. Besides, that would have been against the rules.

"Are you," he said very slowly, "in charge of this convent now?"

"Yes," she said calmly, "and what can I do for you?"

She saw me rising from the floor and ordered me: "Please wait outside, and tell Sister Bonaventura to ring up Father Anthony. Tell him to come across."



So I closed the door behind me and went into the pantry next door, where Sister Bonaventura was, as usual, attending to the guest-room glass and silver. She then ran into the office to telephone, but Father Anthony was out.

"I want to see my daughter, I insist," we heard the man shout quite distinctly.

"That, you must be aware, is quite against the rules," I heard Mother Superior answer calmly.

She was evidently not afraid of any one. She had her faith behind her, she had over eighty nuns behind her too, all welcoming a battle for their faith and their conviction. Father Anthony, one felt, was not really needed.

"Very well," Mother Superior said at last, "but you will have to tell me why."

"Well," the man shouted aggressively, "do you really want to know? . . . It's a shocking thing to be informed that one's daughter is dying because she is leading an unhealthy life. . . . Do you want to know what I call this kind of life? . . . I call it suicide! . . . And what's more, I won't stand by and see it happen. . . . Let me tell you it's a scandal, that's what it is. I'll make it public. I'll have an inquiry made, that's what I'll do, an inquiry into the state of affairs in this—this filthy mousetrap of yours."

Sister Bonaventura giggled as she pressed her ear against the hatch. "Hear, hear," she said, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

I was sent out into the heat of the day to fetch Sister Elisabeth, who had gone with the rest of them working in the distant fields. When I found her at last, ineffectively wielding a pitchfork, and told her that her father was here, she looked as though she did not really believe me. Such things simply did not happen. She was a little frightened, too, and seemed terribly exhausted and lifeless as she walked by my side, coughing a little now and then. Her perspiration had penetrated her gown on her shoulders and her starched collar and head-dress were limp. We never spoke a word, indeed Sister Elisabeth seemed barely present in her body. That "absence," I mused, was something her father would not be able to understand. It would be like talking to someone infinitely far away.

Arrived at the reception room, I opened the door for her and caught a glimpse of the three superiors sitting at the head of the table, hands folded, not unlike three fat and comfortable Buddhas, and the back of the angry man facing the window. I heard the French clock ticking pompously. That was all. A little time passed and there was no sound at all. Then we heard his voice again, saying that he had known it all the

time, and that they should look at her now and compare the thing they saw, this—this ghost of a girl, to the healthy young woman that had arrived there seven years ago . . . and that he had always known how damn silly it was to give way to women. . . . “You’re worse than drug addicts or drunkards,” he shouted so that it could be heard out in the garden, and someone, one of the superiors, rose and closed the window. “It ought to be stopped by law,” it came through the wall. “Why, look at my girl; look at her.”

Not a word was uttered by any of the women in the room. They just sat, never doubting their own wisdom, never disturbed in any way, the reverend mother looking as though she was saying her beads. Probably she was. This was evidently a madman to be humoured, a dangerous man even, a wretched man without grace.

“Very well,” Mother Superior said eventually, “we will leave you alone now with Sister Elisabeth until vespers. She alone will be able to decide and give you an answer. There is, as you know, no law to keep her here.”

So Sister Elisabeth had lunch alone with her father in the guest room, an unheard-of privilege. It was a good lunch, fried chicken, salad, and Italian wine. It was the best lunch she had had since the day when she had taken the veil, many years ago. Sister Elisabeth was

not hungry, though. Tears shone in her eyes as she sat opposite her father, who was still too angry to eat. Soon, though, his somewhat coarse features looked more relaxed and, it seemed to me, betrayed some doubt. They had, apparently, nothing to say to each other at all. There was no argument, nothing. It was all over. Once they had been friends, had teased each other, and now they had nothing more to say. It seemed that his daughter, this strange, pale woman, was his child no more. He should not have expected it. Once more he made an attempt after the second glass of wine.

“What I would like to know,” he said, “is what happens to you all . . . in the end? Do you just go on like this . . . until you drop, all of you; that pompous female your superior and that little girl polishing the furniture? . . . Bad food. Don’t contradict, I know. I can see it. Damn it all, any fool can see it. . . . Joan,” he shook his head, “it’s a shabby, dingy life . . . only, thank God, you don’t seem to know it.”

Sister Elisabeth stared down at the Turkey carpet and did not answer. There was nothing she could have said.

“Come, come,” he implored her, “admit it and then let’s make a break, before it is too late. Come home with me; your poor mother’s waiting. They can’t stop

you, you know. Nobody can, not even the pope."

He put his hand on Joan's and then she gently moved hers and again lowered her eyelids. He was now at a loss. . . . It was a comfortable enough room, heavy velvet curtains, a parquet floor, good rugs and carpets and pictures of fat and contented people, popes, cardinals, and bishops, abbesses, saints, and Madonnas. And there sat his Joan in a shabby gown far too thick for the time of year and shockingly unhygienic, her hands grown coarse, her back bent already, and . . . hang it all, he could not see her hair. What the blazes had they done with it? Time passed and ticked away and the nuns were walking in the garden, Sister Pelagia with her eternal wheelbarrow and Sister Therese with her crutches, and as it was hot and all the windows open wide he suddenly heard a cry emanating from the top of the building: "Jesus, Jesus, have mercy on me!"

It sounded crazy. There was no mistake, it sounded mad. He looked at his daughter as if for an explanation, but she never raised her eyes. The clock was ticking loudly and a bell was ringing and he had not achieved a thing. He had made a bad impression and he knew it. Another hour until vespers and nothing more to say. He tried once more by using different tactics, recalling the past, hoping thereby to weaken

her with love, with pity even, but by four o'clock he knew that it was hopeless. The nunnery had claimed his Joan as, mysteriously, it claimed them all. It had become her centre, her whole universe. Seven years was a long time, and he had come too late. No one, that superior woman had told him, had ever changed her mind after all that time. Joan's eyes looked large, larger than they should, and seemed to him empty, shockingly so. Once more he clutched her hand and pressed it, but she remained vacant, cold, and absent-minded. He could no longer argue with conviction. He could not, he felt, endure another hour in this house.

I felt unspeakably sorry for this man as I saw him formally taking leave of what was once his daughter, standing in the porch which was lined with scores of statues, cold Madonnas, pathetic gifts from parents. This changeling daughter of his, who, it seemed, with constant praying had lost her identity, had seemingly, in his opinion, lost her soul. He looked a tired, beaten man, quite unlike the fellow who had rung the bell earlier in the morning. He could not even feel angry now. He had been given a free hand, and he had lost. There had been no one there to contradict him, no one with whom he could argue. He had been up against something which he failed to understand.

Many eyes watched him go; eyes behind lace curtains from the kitchen window and the scullery, the office even, as well as from the fourth-floor windows and the garden too. A whole world of women, against one man! It was a hot day, with thunder in the air, and Sister Elisabeth walked back to the haymaking, coughing a little, praying as she went, just as if nothing had happened; apparently seeing nothing, hearing nothing, following some crazy vision of her own. Her father, her childhood, her whole past had become in so short a time entirely unreal to her.

SISTER PELAGIA was carting manure to the lettuce-beds below while I was sitting on the roof veranda, which was asphalted, and so hot that the tarmac rose beneath the rubble and blistered. Seven nuns in various stages of mental decay had been coaxed up there to sit in the sun while their barred apartments on the fourth floor were given a spring cleaning. They sat in silence, guarded constantly by six of us. Their faces were smooth and vacant. They were, it seemed, immune from any suffering and had long ceased to dwell on life and death, on heaven and hell, or sin and

punishment. They sat there, not knowing why they were there, not remembering how they came to be there, except one, the youngest of them all, Sister Anastasia, who every now and then talked to herself, wailing a bit and then making constant secret plans to meet Jesus. She had to do it in secret, she said, because evil spirits might waylay her.

We novices did not pity them very much. Their fate, we felt, could have been avoided with a little more will. Besides, we were young, and we really only understood the young. Out of the silence rose the screech of Sister Pelagia's wheelbarrow as she carted it down the gravel path. Midday approached, and far below at the foot of the steps a handful of tramps waited for their bread and soup. They often waited there until they fell asleep on the stone seats in the porch. They all knew each other, for they were our *habitués* and had been coming here for many years. Some of them secretly slept on the hay above the horses. The reverend mother had forbidden it, but there was no one in the hayloft to watch and turn them out. They had apparently become as silent as we. The worst about so much silence, I mused, was that one's mind began to wander and in time it became most difficult to concentrate on anything. Breviaries and prayers were often read and said with a mind as blank as the walls of the Mystic Rose.



At the stroke of twelve Marietta went off to Benwyl, whence she took the train to Geneva, where she was given a weekly music lesson by a very famous teacher. Marietta, the favoured one, the only really favoured one, for it was an unheard-of thing for a nun in our Order to go out alone or to go out at all.

We were not entirely without envy, for it was a lovely day to be off and across the lake. Some found it a little galling, having fled from a competitive world, to look out upon a field golden with ripening barley known as Marietta's field, or to be given permission to practise on the grand piano in the dining-hall known as Marietta's piano. She, too, had to work, of course, just as we did, and her finger-nails, I had noticed as she worked at my side in the vineyard the other day, were as broken and neglected as mine.

I shall always remember that burning summer's day, the smell of the hay, Marietta going out, the beggars asleep below, the peace, nothing to fear; and then Sister Anastasia calling out: "Jesus, Maria, and St. Joseph!" spilling from her lap the gooseberries she had been plucking, looking frightened, breathing quickly, gazing fascinatedly across the spire of the church where the brass crucifix glittered blindingly in the sun.

"Listen, listen!" she whispered. "Bells ringing from heaven! . . ." and then, quite abruptly, she calmed

down and forgot again. And then, suddenly, far below in the garden, someone, a man, began to swear and shout and cry out in the silence. The most unheard-of, the most inhuman language, rose up from the garden and scattered everybody's prayers. We ran to the windows, to see one of the tramps taking his, and then both his friends', bowls of soup and maliciously splashing all the plaster statues one by one with the contents and then finishing the job by aiming his enamel bowl at poor St. Joseph's head.

"What is it? O Jesus!" a nun cried from a window, and then suddenly it was quite still again. The man walked away, out through the gates, muttering unrepeatable words about nuns in general, and the quality of our soup and the virginity of the reverend mother in particular. By the gate he stopped, a little theatrically I thought, turned round and cursed us loudly and distinctly, and shook his fist, both fists, spat, threatened to burn the place down, and then walked away along the wall and disappeared.

He was a young man, very young really, to take it upon him to curse a nunnery which housed over eighty nuns and some of them quite formidable. And then eternity was once more restored.

So time went on. Summer was not much easier than winter. Incidents like these happened only in the

summer. Perhaps it was the hot winds which blew down the valleys and were frequently followed by thunderstorms. Physically we existed almost fantastically on food which contained almost no sugar at all and very little fat, on meals almost entirely without fruit and the most indifferent of vegetables. We knew what it was to crave for sugar or the acid juiciness of fruit, and I knew what temptation meant when I was sent to help Sister Monica in the upper kitchen, where the food for the priests was usually prepared. She was a much better cook than Sister Victoria, a swarthy, melancholy woman, painfully slow, and so tired that she seemed always to rely on the saints and angels to bear her up. I was constantly sent into the cellar, an enormous place filled with barrels of wine, cider, kirsch, and rum, sacks of sugar, and many fascinating spices. For weeks I doled out drinks for the guest room, for there were always many visiting priests who came for a rest or to see Father Anthony or, who knows? were in search of a good meal. They were royally entertained.

These meals, however, were a temptation to us who had to prepare them. Sister Bonaventura grew slightly more frivolous on remnants left here and there which we were not supposed to touch, and which none of us did touch except her. She had that kind of humour

which was complete tolerance for others as well as for herself. Too much of her company I found unsettling. She was a tremendous realist at heart and not, as the rest of us, filled with the glamour of sacrifice. She would jerk her thumb in the direction of the dining-room and close one eye as we heard the priests laughing loudly, breaking out in song. They were singing louder and louder, almost hilariously, as the afternoon went on. It is true they were singing hymns and fatherland songs, but they bawled them loudly, without musical discrimination, and thoughtful, human Sister Bonaventura ran along to close their window. Having thus laid aside their dignity for once, the priests returned, presumably, to their abstemious lives somewhat fortified.

Alas, for us there were never any feasts. As I was looking from the window, seeing them depart in their clerical garb, flushed, yet still creatures of great authority, superior to us because they were priests and men whose hands were hallowed, who, too had been called and wisely chosen. I saw over four hundred chemises and other quite unmentionable but drab flannel undergarments fluttering merrily on the lines across the garden, waving and dancing in the sun, looking shockingly realistic, filled as they were with the wind. Sister Bonaventura screeched with laughter

at this rhapsodic display of faded pinks and blues, and I am afraid I thought it very funny too. But not for long.

“Do you think that funny?” Sister Gabriella hissed as she stood on the doorstep. “Come with me,” she added, and I meekly followed her into the outer office, the one the assistant mother usually did the books in. It was empty now. Sister Gabriella sat herself behind the huge mahogany desk while I stood trembling at the door. Through the open window I caught one more glimpse of the offending washing. A warm breeze blew in from the garden and once more we heard the united laughter from the priests across the compound. Two roses stood in a glass jar on the desk, filling the air with delicate fragrance.

Sister Gabriella did not speak for a long while, she just sat and stared at me. Then she placed the tips of her fingers together and said: “There is something wrong with your sense of humour; I expect you know that, don’t you?”

“I am sorry,” I said quite simply. There was nothing else to say, short of an argument.

“It is somewhat low, isn’t it?” she went on. “Something will have to be done to combat this growing influence.”

I wondered whose influence she meant. Then Sister Gabriella rose. She was not tall, but now she looked it. "Go!" she commanded, pointing to the door. One went quickly, and gladly too, when she spoke like that. She certainly had great authority. Some day, I thought, she would stand with popes and cardinals and all the recognized saints on the right hand near the throne of God Himself.

My spirit duly humbled, I knelt down in the kitchen with the others to pray as the second bell, the one that corresponded with the note "A," vibrated sadly across the garden, my hungry eyes sweeping across the dressers while I prayed. There was a dish of asparagus with a jar of mayonnaise ready for the priests' suppers. I had made that mayonnaise the day before, using fourteen eggs. I had licked the spoon. It had been the first taste of egg I had had since leaving home. There were some crisp radishes and various morsels of *hors-d'œuvre* arranged round a couple of spring chickens.

Prayers over, I went back into the scullery to whip some cream for a couple of trifles while Sister Bonaventura was singing her favourite song: "Je veux entendre, etc. . . . I wish to hear the rustling of the angels' wings at my death." Then as she glanced out of the window she came to a dead halt. They were taking

down the washing, although it was not yet dry. It was never hung out that side of the house again. All because of my misguided sense of humour.

**B**UT mostly there was peace. Once, though, later in the summer, after weeks of drought, there was a shocking fight. It was over in a second. Two nuns who had never been known even to be rude to each other had suddenly, without apparent motive, leaped out of the calm of an afternoon, and wordlessly, for it was the hour of silence, torn each other's veils. Utterly exhausted by their emotions and quick remorse they had dragged themselves away to cool down at the foot of the cross, looking very human indeed.

None of us was really shocked; we were all mortally weak and often irritable and sometimes we were hungry, and some of us would have gladly put aside the crucifix awhile for an interesting meal. One of the novices not yet schooled in self-control had shrieked, and her shriek had shocked us more than the fight had done. Silence followed.

It had been an incident, and the reverend mother, as far as I knew, had never been told. It was soon for-

gotten. It had to be, just as we forgot any other signs of passing hysteria, such as fits of weeping in the night, or months of complete inability to pray. Even Bonaventura, one Sunday after vespers, had hurled herself on to the horse-hair sofa in the pharmacy and cried loudly, almost happily, like a child. Perhaps she had just been sick for home. Those back streets of Genoa had been a friendly place. She had liked living in the slums. It had been interesting. But then the Bleeding Heart of Jesus had worked wonders again, almost like a narcotic, and a good cry, even in a nunnery, was a safety-valve.

**S**ISTER CORNELIA was lying on a deck-chair in the sun, doing nothing. Her eyes followed the pigeons as they darted in and out of the loft. She had for many weeks been mortally sick and she felt now, since she had recovered a little, that she did not wish to die just yet, in spite of having renounced the world. It was strange, it was terribly disturbing, but since her illness her whole outlook had completely altered, her whole life at the Mystic Rose, to which she had clung so fanatically, especially during the first few years, had



now become a lie. Coming so near to death, she felt that after all she had indeed a taste for life. She wanted to live as she had never wanted to live before. She was conscious, too, of desire; those passing phases of desire, Father Anthony had said, trying to comfort her during confession, were merely part of her disease.

It was all very frightening. Life was not gentle if you came to think of it, even here in this unworldly sanctuary. Every hour of the day she was offending God by contemplating flight. And she was mortally afraid of His wrath. No one in the history of the Mystic Rose had ever dared to break a vow. So she tried to cast the temptation from her mind. She had never doubted that apart from their idealism the nuns had a mission too, the mission to pray for the world. Much good was said to have come from such constant praying, but even this was now somewhat beyond her. She could no more conceive God listening, hearing, growing conscious of some terrible need on earth, only if He was constantly wheedled. It was not now her idea of God.

She wished she was light-hearted and merry like Bonaventura, who was singing below and was full of little jokes, as those happy ones were who had become like little children; or those who took such passionate delight in the cross. She too had done that once. But now she was thankful to be fit again, to be able to kneel

in church. Her fever had left her and perhaps the old kind of peace would once more return to her. Kneeling in church was restful, anyway, for the body as well as the mind. The side altars were fantastically decorated, even now in summer, with artificial roses and dyed paper leaves. The sisters, bless them, were always a little gaudy in their tastes. They needed colour here and there. Dozens of nuns emerged from the sacristy, which was a short cut from the convent, passed the altar, genuflected, and then drifted one by one into their pews, bending low, so that from the back of the church it looked as if the whole of the nave was covered in a deep black shroud.

The night approached again, and with it tiredness and more doubts about the true vocation and about simple strength and endurance. But there was nothing she could do except go on until the end. She was penniless, she was helpless and very tired, and of course she was, as they all were, terribly afraid of the outside world. Besides, once a vow was made one was enveloped in an everlasting web. No one had ever had the courage yet to run away. But perhaps no one had ever been consumed as she was with dreams and desires which were not of the spirit.

In the meantime Dr. Ann would come again and talk to her, the lady doctor who had lately been called

in, a brisk, middle-aged woman from a neighbouring town, who had removed the curtains in her cell and opened the windows wide and had bluntly inquired after the nuns' food. Once she had drawn Sister Cornelia's attention to Sister Alberta, Sister Agnes, Sister Dominica, Sister Agatha, and several others who were either laid up too or hobbled along on crutches, every one of them, for some strange reason known to God alone, afflicted with consumption. It was as though she had meant to warn her of her ultimate fate.

So with Sister Cornelia her long and shocking illness held no joy of martyrdom, but was only the death of a dream. But nothing further happened for several months. Autumn passed, and then there was Christmas.

CHRISTMAS was one of these occasions when all of us met and talked more freely, and were given a meal of roast veal and blancmanges dyed with cochineal, which was served with a glass or two of slightly intoxicating punch made of red wine and cinnamon. The teachers of the school were given the best places at a table facing the whole of the room. Sister Augusta, the

emaciated prefect who had a degree in literature and mathematics, and the red-cheeked, stocky Sister Roberta, who was a doctor of science and who had also, it seemed, found fulfilment and as yet only a mild touch of tuberculosis, were closest to the two priests, who sat at either side of the reverend mother, her assistant, and Sister Gabriella.

Next came two Italian nuns who taught Italian and French, both amazingly alike, plump and cowlike, a little lonely, a little outcast, always, it seemed, sticking together by instinct against the fairer women, the Swiss, the Scandinavians, the Dutch, and the Germans.

We grew quite frivolous on this much-diluted wine and there was far more talk than usual. The table cleared, and the Christmas tree reaching high up to the ceiling was lit by Sister Pelagia standing on her steps. The priests looked on, rather bored. They had come to our dinner for our sakes, ate our food without much interest. They knew our Christmas. They had shared it now for many years and it had always been the same. There was the usual buzzing of women's voices and presently every one would sing. Father Anthony, hearing our confessions, knew us all so well, our little idiosyncrasies, our little ways and habits, and probably our thoughts. He knew Sister Pelagia would presently fall asleep sitting upright in her chair and that the

Mother Superior and Sister Gabriella were busy in many fussy little ways spreading their authority. Not one of them, it seemed, had ever done anything out of the ordinary. Father Anthony was feeling a little depressed. He always felt like that on Christmas Day. Life seemed to be slipping away and he wished himself back in the all-absorbing library of his monastery. Besides, he did not like women.

It was different with Father Joseph, who was always sympathetic and smiled a little at the happy childish faces of some of the youngest nuns. He, too, knew us all, from a different angle though. He was afraid of some of us. His podgy features drooped a little as he watched the more determined nuns one by one as they sat around him in a circle, and his kindly blue eyes grew cold. So many of them, once the difficulties of the first few years were over, grew surprisingly grim and, he thought, a little unforgiving where he himself was concerned. There was a good deal of pathos about the little man, and it was said that he was weak and far too affectionate, unbecomingly so for a priest, and we novices had been warned never at any time to run after him for counsel.

Women, he thought as he scanned their faces, once they ceased to be young and life ceased nagging at their hearts, grew tremendously determined, those who kept

their health. And he did not like determined women. There was, he had observed, a whole world of stubbornness and will-power behind a woman apparently knitting placidly or merely telling her beads. One needed only to look at the women at his side. Everything they did, every movement they made, seemed to speak of some curbed desire and some thwarted personality. Yes, he was on the whole afraid of them, most of them; and he, like Father Anthony, did not like nuns. For different reasons though.

But there were others, of course, those novices and candidates and younger nuns who, he thought as he watched them at the other table, did not seem to have much to say. They looked peaceful though, most of them having surrendered their souls entirely. They were free of urges—as yet. With the others he had had many a silent tussle, and they had always won. He was always ill at ease at these parties; he had been quietly snubbed many a time but he had ceased to care. “Give me the children,” he thought, “any time,” and his eyes wandered down the table where nine little girls sat by themselves; children still in their teens, daughters of actresses, divorcees, or widows who could offer them no home, even now at Christmas. They were pure in mind, they trusted him, they were not eternally absorbed with sin. They were happy enough now, gig-

gling in the corner, secretly laughing at the nuns. Well, they were all merry-making now, calling each other by their secret nicknames like "Castor-oil" or "Moon-struck," hitting each other playfully on the back. There was some laughter too, but it sounded a little forced and hollow. Silence imposed so often soon became second nature and then gradually a necessity. We all gathered round the tree, except those who were sick. Sister Gonzaga, our visionary, whose face was purple owing to some trouble with her heart, leaned heavily against her table, staring absently in front of her. Then some of us held up our skirts a little and danced sedately round the tree, singing like children a kind of "Here we come gathering nuts in May, nuts in May," etc. Soon exhausted, we begun to sing Christmas carols. *Silent night, holy night*, was the favourite. We sang it seven times.

The singing was remarkably good and Father Anthony ceased to yawn and sang a little, too, beating time with his finger. By his side were two bottles of white wine covered with dust and cobwebs, and soon both priests were feeling more at home, a little less bored, less cool, less distant. It was friendly in the decorated dining-hall, decorated mostly with holly and artificial roses, a little faded tinsel, too. An extra load of coke had been added to the central heating by Sister

Pelagia and it was warmer in the room than usual, the pipes hot to touch; and outside the land was white with snow and the distant lake was almost frozen over and shone like glass. Flakes fell gently against the window panes and the rest of the world was very far away. This was the birthday of Christ and, being a day of joy, we had been given the letters which had arrived for us during the last few days.

The church was also beautifully decorated with whole branches of pine and paper roses of white and red crinkle-paper which we had made for the occasion, curling up their leaves realistically with knitting-needles. We thought of home, the carefree winters at home, skating in the moonlight, and the windows of all the houses alight with Christmas trees. But with a will we strove to live in the present alone. Each was given another glass of cinnamon wine, and then Sister Bonaventura, looking gay, letting her roguish eyes roam across the table to the priests, who, however much they pretended, could not have been wholly unaware of her, distributed from a laundry basket glazed ginger cakes in the shape of a Santa Claus, an angel, or a heart. There was one for each of us. Sister Pelagia grinned as she was given a heart and held it up for us to see and then bit into it with gusto, her black moustache outlined against the crust of sugar, looking



more than ever like a jolly old faun in fancy dress. And then Sister Juliana strode heavily across the room and opened Marietta's piano and played some Mozart. She played it well, tremendously evenly, with metronomical precision, like a man.

We listened silently for a while and then the reverend mother discussed with Father Anthony the need of fresh paint on the panelled walls. He did not agree with her. Over by the window behind the lace curtain, looking out, sat mystifying Sister Cornelia trying to eat her ginger cake and sipping her wine. Then she had a sudden bout of coughing, and as she drew out her handkerchief and put it to her mouth she saw that it was red. And as she sat there, she too, like Father Joseph, made her observations. She had, almost without knowing it, observed her companions until they had ceased to be new to her or interesting. Perhaps that was what was wrong with her. Her wanting to renounce the world, her wanting to lead a life in a sacred community; it had been her desire for something new, something picturesque, and a great longing for purity. And now she was sick and perhaps she was going to die.

Her lips trembled a little and once more she dabbed them with her handkerchief. She knew all those who were sick, like herself, in various degrees. It was frightening. She also knew those who would sometime be-

come teachers and prefects and mother superiors later. There were careerists even at the Mystic Rose, just as in the outer world. There were also the curious ones who knew too much, who listened and watched and had a knowing smile, and there were those who were simple and pure, like Sister Elisabeth, for instance, who was now tubercular too. She knew those who had gone queer, some of whom were sitting by themselves in charge of Sister Hedwig nearest the door, staring at nothing, saying nothing, living in a vacant world of their own. She knew those who had grown superstitious, who foretold the most impossible things, and those who were desperately afraid of hell, those who were tempted, like St. Anthony, and were constantly haunted by their guilt.

Then she scanned the novices, those who were still searching for perfection. Stephany she thought lovely and elusive, secretive, her own kind, a bit of a rebel, but infinitely stronger than herself. She would not think of fleeing after seven years, she would stay and presently become an influence. And if she decided to leave she would not plan to do so secretly, but would go openly and tell them why. She also knew the appalling shallowness of some, their stupidity, and lastly those who were truly angelic, the real nuns, the nuns of fiction books, the saints.

Stephany and I blew out the candles as they were burning low. She smiled at me between the branches. It was nice to see her smile. How contemptuous she looked at times though, how aloof she was, how detached from us all. It was fascinating. It set me wondering about her.

As the lights were switched on again we were given our presents; similar to those given the year before, a tooth-brush each and a cake of soap. After that we could sit with whom we liked, and nearly all the novices sidled up to Sister Victoria, our cook. She was so big and warm-hearted, so generous, so happy; she did not seem to fit into the picture, looking far too robust for a nun. Her views were also her own and often so innocently contrary to those of Sister Gabriella that it shocked us. "Had a letter from your mother?" she would ask. "Ah! If you were to ask me for the clearest proof of God's hand, do you know what I would say? You don't know? Let me tell you. It's the love of a mother. Quite simple, isn't it? Only we don't know it sometimes until it is too late."

It was not so much for what she said that we loved Sister Victoria. It was probably more because she was strong and happy and had a sense of humour. I noticed that a few of the novices had flocked over to sit with Sister Hedwig, our pharmacist, for the same reason, I

guessed, as we sidled up to Sister Victoria.

"Now, run along, run along," Sister Victoria said after a while, for she was not allowed to encourage us. There were to be no partialities at the Mystic Rose. It was always safest to love only God, Sister Gonzaga must have thought as she left our table and slipped out with a shawl over her shoulders, disappearing across the snowbound garden into the grotto to kneel in front of our Lady, but when she returned she still looked unhappy and afraid. The clock struck eight and the priests went home to change for Benediction.

It was only in my second year that I got to know Stephany a little better. We were alone up in the vast and airy attic, sorting bed-linen for the mending-room, when she told me why she had fled from her native Poland to renounce the world. She had fallen in love with a married man and he with her. No one had known, not even her parents. That was why they had not understood. "This," she drew a circle in the air, "is my atonement." Her lover had since committed suicide. "Yes," she sighed, "that was only fourteen months ago."

For a little while she spoke of Poland; the snow, the frozen rivers, and how she had seen him for the last time in the forest, meeting him on horseback, and how they had spent the afternoon in a log hut belonging to

her father, and how he had taken it to heart when she told him of her decision. She could still see his face as she saw it then in the shadow of that dismal wood. He had been very quiet then, and as there seemed no answer to their dilemma he had ridden away and she had left for the Mystic Rose before they had another chance to meet. She meant to stay at the Mystic Rose for ever. She might have carried on at home, intriguing behind everybody's back like the rest of her set, or even fallen in love with someone else in time.

Dusk was gathering in the attic as we worked, and I shall never forget Stephany's face as she stood in the last rays of the sun, saying how glad she felt that I was at the Mystic Rose with her, and that she hoped I should never think of leaving. She said she would miss me if I did, and that she did not much care for some of the others, with their incessant talk of purity, their unwashed gowns, their indigestion, their shabbiness, and their decaying teeth. Nor did she care for Sister Gabriella, so small, so primitive really, and, yes, so perverted.

I was genuinely shocked at Stephany. I had had no idea she felt so bitter. God knows I had been feeling critical myself, but never as much as that. Anyway, Stephany was not bluffing herself as some others did.

She was not in any way misled or carried away on wings of sentiment. She was to dedicate herself, it seemed to me, less to Jesus Christ than to a memory. But her remarks remained with me, and perhaps it was then that I had my first doubts about being able to remain at the Mystic Rose for ever.

"But I am happy," I kept on saying to myself as we folded and unfolded scores of threadbare sheets. I wanted to be happy.

Suddenly I heard a sound, and for a moment we stopped to listen. Staring down into the darkness of the spiral staircase leading narrowly up to where we were, I saw the white face of Sister Gabriella. Then all at once the shape was gone.

"Gabriella," I whispered to Stephany.

"Always watching," she said.

As we went down, each laden with a pile of linen, and we reached the bottom, she was standing there.

"I expect that you are aware that you have broken your silence up here? . . . In future I will see to it that you two are kept strictly apart." This was, I felt, not ordinary training; it was more like hostility.

Outwardly, at least, Stephany took this threat with calm. We each went our way, she into the sewing-room where thirty nuns sat huddled and silent in simplicity

of mind, I into the kitchen, where I met Melanie, the German girl. There seemed no need for me to offer her my friendship. She was already far ahead of me in gentle saintliness.

Q U I T E indescribably we felt our hearts moved and our consciences tortured during a fortnight's retreat in Lent. We had been fasting, too, and pleading for supernatural strength so that once and for all we could escape from our bodies and become "other-worldly," disembodied really, as a man does when he is being tortured beyond endurance. I tried faithfully to practise this useful art, but did not get very far. There were times when I thought it even dangerous and pointless and purposeless and a waste of God's gift, the gift of life. It seemed to me as dumb as death.

As I saw the nuns come and go from tasks to sermons, from sermons to tasks, they seemed to me to be mere phantoms and their annihilation mocking God. But towards the end of the two weeks I felt more at peace, purified, and almost immaculate. We never spoke a word during these spiritual holidays. Three hours every morning we sat and listened to one or the other

of the two Capucin monks, who were well trained to speak to sinners; moving them first to despair, and then, on the last day, telling them to be of good cheer; leaving them comforted or still frightened or sometimes completely cold, according to age and temperament. They talked to us about the nobility of our calling, but mostly, especially Father Xavier, about mortal sin or the sin of spiritual pride, "the sins which our own consciences at the time of sinning revealed to us as being a grievous transgression of God's law, an act whereof the doer was master at the time, to do or not to do."

Visions of souls in the shapes of human bodies writhing in flames brought home to us young novices the reality, the terrible reality, of hell.

"Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire," Father Xavier, an emaciated young man, shouted from the pulpit, almost reaching down to us with his long ape's arms as he shook an accusing finger, talking with both his hands.

Cold shivers ran down our spines. This was more frightening than war and pestilence, and I began to feel very sorry for the tortured race of man. Sister Bonaventura, who knelt at my side, once nudged me hard. She was not going to be afraid of hell. It was we novices and candidates who took it seriously. Examin-



ing our consciences, worrying, fretting, fasting, and arguing with ourselves, brought us to the fringe of hysteria. Who could be certain that somewhere, undetected, a mortal sin was not lurking in her heart? Never before had we realized how easy it was to lose one's soul.

Two of us had a nervous breakdown after the retreat, only their behaviour was not considered due to nerves. One of them, especially, walked about for days as if in a trance, an expression of haunting fear in her dark eyes. If she knocked into any one by accident she looked touchingly apologetic. I came upon her kneeling alone on the class-room floor, where she was supposed to be doing her lessons, the crucifix in her hands, which she had taken from the wall, weeping bitterly and constantly beating her breast. I silently withdrew. We were never on any account to interfere at such sacred moments.

The two Capucins, already very famous for their preaching, who spoke to us of abstemiousness and renunciation and the sins of the flesh, were fed royally by the nuns. The fact that they ate the food seemed to me inconsistent and their saintliness imperfect. Possessions to them meant nothing, but they did not deny themselves what they were given. They blessed us and made us happy, and if they had wanted a roasted calf

the nuns would have gladly prepared one. Sister Bonaventura thought, as she was busy in the pantry, that this was only natural. Men were men, she said, as though that was an explanation. As I stood in the scullery beating up some thick cream she would come in giggling and dip her finger in the bowl and lick it with her tiny tongue. But then I was certain she had never really grasped the sanctity of her profession. One ate when one could, she said, if one was hungry. She well remembered the fish-heads which the fishmonger used to give her in the market of Genoa; what splendid soup they had made for herself and her mother, and how she used to thank the Madonna for having sent such things her way. And then, giggling again, she pointed to the window, through which we saw the two Capucin monks walking up and down, looking slightly bilious; their coarse, hairy gowns flapping round their thin, bare legs, their naked toes sticking from their sandals. "I wonder," she said with a happy gurgle, "what God really thinks of them."

NOW as Sister Gonzaga was dying in her dark little cell at the corner of the first-floor dormitory, which was called the sanatorium, she grew strangely exalted.

She knew she was going to die and she was glad. Taking stock of her life, which had been one of purity and prayer, she grew increasingly excited. It made one think of a dove cleaning its wings prior to its flight, waiting only for a gust of wind. She spoke of death as one speaks of a beloved person in that other land, the outside world. By her side, on a table, lay the Soliloquie of St. Augustine and the Reminiscences of Catherine of Siena. Those were nearly all the literature of the convent's little library. But no one had any time to read; not until they were nearly dying, and then books became superfluous. A visit to Gonzaga's cabin was to all of us a lesson in great holiness. Although she was very weak we often found her outside her bed, having attempted to kneel on the floor-boards, this being, in her opinion, the most acceptable way to God to receive her last prayers upon this earth. She was usually too weak to get back into bed again and we had to lift her in. She was not very heavy. Once she clamoured to be taken down into the chapel and then into the reception room so she could have a last look at the "Mystic Rose," which had always been her favourite picture. The reverend mother wisely said no. But the German girl Melanie, already far on her way to saintliness, went down and took the heavy painting from the wall, and staggered upstairs with it, where she placed

it gently against the wall. This placid Mystic Rose, looking far into the distance down all the ages, apparently quite absent-mindedly nursing a chubby baby on her knees, gave Sister Gonzaga, for some obscure reason, great joy and consolation.

In the morning she grew weaker and announced that on Sunday she would be gone. Melanie, who was nursing her, and knitting while she sat by the window, loudly recited with her the *Te Deum*. During the next few days every one hovered round the door, hoping that Gonzaga might have another vision, and that they might thus glimpse paradise through Gonzaga's eyes. But none came. It seems hardly real now as I write of it. I remember it distinctly. Never was there such a spring as this. The orchards were pink and white with apple-blossoms, the forget-me-nots were out, and in the courtyard the wild chestnut-trees were covered in bloom.

At that time the pilgrims arrived, a very dirty crowd of people, some of them from as far as Bohemia. They filled the church with a disgusting stench. They, too, were hoping for a miracle; praying for bread and, above all, for peace on earth. Many of them had walked from Austria and some from Germany. It was a ragged procession of men and, mostly, women, all of them very poor. They came completely empty-handed

except in spirit. Our Virgin had once, centuries ago, wrought a miracle; a small one only, not one of the noticeable kind. Since then other pilgrims had come every spring to ask for more, but nothing spectacular had happened again. It was difficult to know what they asked of God year after year, people as weary and as dead as these. It was peace, they said, that they wanted most. Nothing, nothing, an old woman moaned as she spoke to Sister Ursula, who was practising the organ, was so frightening and so hopeless as war.

Sister Gonzaga was the fourth nun to die since I arrived at the Mystic Rose, but she was the only one to have any visions.

"My Beloved," she whispered, as the end drew near. We crowded round her, hoping to learn a little more from one who was already on the "threshold." "Perhaps she is already seeing Him," whispered Sister Anselma excitedly.

It was fascinating and it was shocking. We should, I felt, have left her with her secrets. Curiosity, at this moment, seemed to me to be the most prominent sin of us all.

It was intolerably hot and stuffy in that tiny cell. "For heaven's sake," I cried suddenly, "open the window," and then everybody stared at me as I stood under the doorway with the golden crucifix in my arm, which

I had been sent to fetch and which was always taken to the dying to be kissed.

But no one moved. Two nuns were praying loudly:

“When my hands, cold and trembling, shall no longer be able to clasp the crucifix, and against my will shall let it fall on my bed of suffering, merciful God, have mercy on me. When my imagination, agitated by dreadful spectres, shall be sunk in an abyss of anguish; when my soul, affrighted with the sight of my iniquities and the terrors of Thy judgments, shall have to fight against the angel of darkness, who will endeavour to conceal Thy mercy from mine eyes, and to plunge me into despair, merciful Jesus, have mercy on me:”

As the nuns were droning on with “The Litany for a happy Death,” Gonzaga suddenly spoke:

“Look! Look! I am coming!” A moment later she added: “Mother!” That was all. It was difficult to know which mother she meant, her own or the Heavenly Queen. Her expression was happy indeed and tears of joy ran down her cheeks, and Melanie ran up and lifted her head from the pillow so that for the last time she could see the jewelled cross which two nuns held high above her head. Another nun pressed a burning candle into Gonzaga’s hand just as the bells were ringing for the Angelus, and as we knelt down in the dormitory I noticed that the yellow taper suddenly

slipped from her grasp. Someone rushed to blow it out. Sister Gonzaga had gone. She had gone with the first bell of the Angelus.

On Sunday morning after Mass we all trooped into her cell once more to kiss her hand and to look upon her now smooth and unlined face. Every one had liked Gonzaga. She had been selfless and unassuming. But she left no gap. Like nearly all the nuns she had just faded out, a wisp of a cloud in a summer breeze.

I thought of her that night as I tried to sleep. We had been praying for her a great deal during the day, for her soul which was now in purgatory. Pinned against the wall in her cell I had seen a faded scrap of paper, on which, when she was still young, she had written the now almost illegible sentence: "Es lebe die Tat" (Long live the deed). It had signified her youthful attitude towards renunciation. The Mystic Rose had not been much of a shelter, from a worldly point of view, for the daughter of a wealthy farmer. The life there was the nearest thing to beggary, and one subsisted, literally, on the merest crust. She had once been a very cheerful nun, Sister Victoria said, flashing about here and there with tremendous strides, her skirts flying; and now, she added, "she is exploring the eternal regions."

The next day, Monday, after Mass, the cobbler, the

baker, a carpenter, and the stable-boy carried the coffin into the church and placed it near the altar, and four yellow candles were lit on each side. The pigeons were cooing above the porch and the sun was shining brilliantly as we buried her. We knelt in the wet clay while Father Anthony sprinkled the coffin with blessed water. Then we all took the sprinkler in turn and each of us threw down a clod of earth. No one mourned her. On the contrary. She was now, most likely, not only one of the brides, but one of the saints in heaven. In this blessed conviction we were all completely and happily unanimous.

OVER five hundred days had gone. That was how I counted the days. There seemed no reason why. No one else, as far as I knew, bothered with time as I did. Life in a nunnery was as timeless as eternity. The trouble was, I had a roving mind, and as I worked I wondered how it would be outside now; to stand on the distant hills, free to go on over the horizon.

Sometimes I forgot myself and started to plan and day-dream of a future that was not here but elsewhere. The time came when, to my joy, I was given another



cell, one with a window, as another small batch of novices had lately arrived. I could now see the forests in the distance and the snow-capped mountain-tops behind. I could also see the road which led far and away over the hills. I longed to be out on it. That was probably why we were not given cells with windows . . . at first: I could hear the river splashing by and see our cattle grazing on each bank, and some nuns putting linen on the grass to bleach, and a few others over on a rise planting potatoes; tiny dots against the hill.

It seemed marvellous that no one ever walked away, back into the world, to the city where things happened and there were other faces, and people who did not often think of death. I thought of my home, my mother, the sunshine on the chintzes, and the geraniums on the window-sills. But then the bells rang once more for prayers. There was, mercifully, never too much time to think.

One day a nun who was kneeling next to me at Angelus suddenly tumbled sideways on the ground. She was old, very nearly fifty, and she had been at the Mystic Rose for twenty-seven years. That was years before I was born. She was very simple now, like a little child, and would, every one agreed, some day go straight to heaven. What was left of her.

"Not very well?" I asked of her.

"Oh, yes, just a little dizzy," she said, as I helped her up again.

Then I saw myself in her place, all my energy gone, half my mind gone, eyes empty, will gone, too, after so many years of silently chewing the cud. But maybe I would not get like that, not if they gave me a teacher's job. The teachers lasted longer, mentally. Physically, they did not, getting out into the open even less.

As I was musing on that, Marietta walked by with her violin under her arm. Another nun ran to open the door for her, although she could have easily opened it herself. But everybody went out of their way to do things for Marietta. It was astonishing, for she needed kindness less than anyone. That made me think of Uncle Daniel and the money he was not going to leave me now. It would have helped a little. Often, when I was rushing from the kitchen to the store-room past the door of the office, I saw it open and a little crowd of nuns coming out; or sometimes just one or two, but always the same ones. Slowly they would move down the passage and talk in undertones. Those were the sisters whose advice the reverend mother sought, or simply her favourites. I heard them laughing loudly sometimes behind closed doors. Marietta would now soon be one of them, I thought. I too, I planned, would some day want to take a hand at managing af-

fairs; but then, ambition was a sin. Yet it must be fun making a success of things, a whole estate like this. When the reverend mother gave an order it was always carried out unquestioningly. Every one said: "Very well, your reverence," and ran to do it at once.

I should have liked to know if it was really necessary, or even a matter of good business, to feed the nuns so badly, or if the wish to try to make a profit, to do better than the last superior, was too much of a temptation to resist. To be a superior was known to have changed an apparently gentle nun into a personality whose presence sometimes frightened into paralytic impotence those who had actually chosen her by vote after much fasting and praying for heavenly guidance. Even the cobbler and Alfonso grew sheepishly passive and repeated: "Yes, ma'am, yes, ma'am," like imbeciles, when spoken to by her. Even the little old doctor, who sometimes called to sign death certificates, always trembled slightly when in the office he had, in her presence, to put his stethoscope to a woman's chest. And what was more, he never dared to say what was really on his mind. This senile little man did the convent a great service when he died and made room for Ann, the lady doctor, who was not afraid of any one. She spent many a half-hour in the office after her calls, and now there was a rumour that she would not keep her job for long.

It was owing to her that we eventually bought a few dozen rat-traps and caught the rats which infested our dormitories and ran over our pillows in the night.

On her way out, Ann would always peep into the kitchen and cast a knowing glance into our pots and pans; and when there was time she would run up to the fourth floor and have a one-sided chat with those nuns who were there, idly waiting for death to overtake them. She would chaff Sister Dominica, whose drooping shoulders and bent back and loose, repulsive mouth belied her real age, which was only forty-three. Then she would shout at them a little, trying to penetrate their shriveled minds. There was Sister Anastasia who suffered from religious mania. One would think that in a nunnery it would be difficult to differentiate. But to her religion held more fear than comfort, for she had lost that by no means easily retained sense of proportion. Whatever she did, she always clutched a book of devotion in her hands, from which she read loudly all day long, and quite at random. She had once been mentally above the average, but was quite shapeless now, and shockingly untidy. She would rise from her chair, shamle up and down the room with dragging steps, and declaim from her book: "When my face, pale and livid, shall inspire the beholder with pity and dismay; when my hair, bathed in the sweat of

death and stiffening on my head, shall forebode my approaching end, merciful Jesus, have mercy on me." This last sentence she invariably shouted. She would continue, the others taking not the slightest notice: "When mine ears, soon to be for ever closed to the discourse of men, shall be open to hear the irrevocable decree which is to fix my doom for all eternity, merciful Jesus, have mercy on me. When imagination, agitated by dreadful spectres," etc. Then Ann would go up to her and say gently: "Anastasia, come and talk to me," and the droning would cease for a while and the nun would look up to her with a cunning expression, half animal, half terror, and say: "Go away, go away, don't touch me." Ann would stand by the door, tears in her eyes, and suddenly she would turn and run down the stairs, muttering to herself all the way, and slam the front door so that it echoed down all the corridors and made us jump and our hearts beat faster.

The reverend mother, on one such occasion, decided that Ann was not the right kind of woman for the job, whereupon a few agitated helpers rushed to the office for another conference, and it was decided that she was not to be permitted to visit the nuns upstairs again. When she returned the following week she was told of this decision, but she only smiled and said nothing. She called on Sister Cornelia, who was sick again, and

there in her cell she talked as though she was determined to save at least one human being from premature decay. It worried me sometimes how carelessly she talked, for it was the easiest thing for any one to overhear a conversation.

"No use crying in the night," I heard her saying. "What you want to do is act. . . . Either you take an interest in the game and become one of the advisers and change conditions, or . . . It's no use giving up the ghost." Sometimes I overheard stray words like "silly girlhood dreams" or, "It's no earthly use your creeping into corners, trying to obtain visions, you are not that sort . . . thank God!" This sounded to me like blasphemy; but I found it fascinating. I had never heard any one talk like that inside the convent. "I am a scientist," she said once, the door-handle already in her hand. "I know . . . and you don't, that's all the difference. What you are trying to do here is to live like the early saints who abstained from everything: food, exercise, and cleanliness. . . . Yes, and sex." And she demanded of poor Sister Cornelia: "Do you know the effect of that? Why, they became holy! Yes, that's how they did it. Holy! Holy, my eye!" Then Sister Cornelia had a bout of coughing and Ann returned to the bedside and lifted her gently from her pillow. From the door of the cell she smiled back at

her and said: "You don't want to be a saint, do you?"

As I frequently overheard snatches of such conversations while I was busy polishing, I often gave a little cough or two to warn them that they were not the only people there. It was all right for me, of course, to overhear them, or so I thought. Not that I ever heard Sister Cornelia's replies to Ann, she spoke so softly. As I mused on that I felt convinced that whatever the battle was about Cornelia would win. She, after all, had God behind her. And we all knew, of course, that goodness always won.

It was the same the following week and I began to wonder what it was all about, this murmuring, this whispering, these stray remarks. Surely, I thought with horror, no one would dare to come into a nunnery to try to persuade a nun to break her vow? There was the probability of eternal damnation to be considered. Yet Ann did not seem to care. She would snatch her bag and run down the creaky stairs as if she wanted to get out as quickly as she could. I saw her scurrying through the courtyard, darting through the cloisters, dressed in grey, and then I heard her cranking up her car outside the gates.

Soon Sister Cornelia grew stronger again, and her old smile returned and she lay out on the veranda, watching the horizon, doing nothing at all. Ann was

calling still, but they were rarely alone together now. Other sisters sat on the veranda knitting stockings, and they also prayed and watched and listened.

It was summer again, and trippers drove up to the gates, trying to get a glimpse of the convent, staring up at our prison-like houses peopled with so many busy, silent women. Some asked for permission to look over our estate, but it was not often granted. We were proud of our acres, these productive acres, the outcome of years of awful economy and genuine hard labour, our piggeries, and our prosperous-looking barns. It was evidently fascinating to see nuns making hay, spraying the vines, and sweltering in the sun so unsuitably clothed, kneeling down at the stroke of a bell, and marching home for vespers two by two, like convicts. I shall never forget how pleasant it was when we were tired, to come back out of the hot sun into the cool dimness and silence of the convent. It was like entering a beehive, each of us a tiny part of it, a tiny spoke in the wheel. It was pleasant, too, to sit down to our enormous cups of coffee, and feel agreeably soothed by the drone of a nun's voice reading to us about purity, to which, judging by the blank faces of almost all of us, no one seemed to listen.

As the dining-room was on a level with the ground, we often saw Father Anthony walk by up the garden



path with a book in his hand. Sometimes we envied him a little. He did no manual labour. To us he always looked magnificent, and our eyes followed him, the adoring eyes of his daughters in Christ. Like sheep we turned our heads to watch him walking up into the shade of the old lime-tree where he often sat to read. It was his favourite spot. We were never bored observing Father Anthony and anything he did was of great interest to us. He was to us a creature of romance, and, as I said, we envied him a little, too, for many reasons. He was never at the mercy of his feelings or his nerves or whatever it was we were at the mercy of.

Then the droning, empty sermon-reading ceased and we prayed and cleared the table. Doors banged in the wind and crockery clattered, but never a word was spoken. I usually escaped upstairs to wash my face, but there was so little time to spare for personal things like that. It seemed many a day I had rushed up these many flights of stairs, passing a beautiful print on the top landing, of St. Philomena tied to a tree, her white Grecian gown pierced with swords. Then down again into the hall to Benediction; some of us still thinking of Father Anthony, imagining him getting ready, too, for the service, having a cool bath, perhaps, for he was the only one owning such a thing. As we knelt in church, with the sun still shining through the painted

glass so that blue and purple shadows danced on our books and hands, we saw Father Joseph there instead of Father Anthony, and some of us were disappointed.

With that, another day was over; and with our coarse, damp clothes we laid aside our bodies, and our spirits were free to roam into distant and forbidden territories. It was difficult to believe that it would always be like that, thirty, forty, fifty years hence, bells ringing, and work, work, work perpetually and never a book to read; a few moments only of real leisure and never any privacy, or a change of clothing even. As I lay in bed I felt my limbs, and as my hands passed over my legs and hips I was shocked to find how thin I had become. Was it because I was so often hungry?

Then came sleep and yet another day. There were all kinds of days, of course, just as in the outside world; days when we were being scolded, unlucky days, dreary, hopeless days, and days when we were glad we had renounced the world.

Many were happier than I was. One part of me was pulling this way and another that way. One part was curious about life, and the other wanted peace and nothingness. Terrifying thoughts sometimes came to me. Should I walk out and slip back into the old world, with its miseries, its constant talk of war, its smallness,

and false values? Or should I remain here? There were false values, too, it seemed to me, inside the Mystic Rose. And what about God Himself? It was unthinkable. It was something I had to forget. I began to work again with renewed energy.

Often I wove fancies about the nuns and novices; wondering why Cornelia, who was now at work again, walked down to the grotto during recreation to pray, always with a handkerchief pressed tightly in her hand. Was she still spitting blood? Also, I wondered why the English girl, who had only recently arrived and whom I did not know at all, picked up her long skirt when she thought herself unseen, and started to run like a hare up and down the vegetable garden; or why she frequently, but secretly, let Barry the dog off his chain; or why Sister Pelagia made off alone into the wood, carrying a knife, and looking back over her shoulders twice. I asked myself why we were all so idiotically interested in Father Anthony, and so pleased if he spoke to us at all; and why Sister Juliana had kissed Marietta in the sacristy, when kissing was so strictly prohibited. Above all, I wondered why Father Joseph was so despised. Was it because he had really done some wrong, or simply because he looked so ordinary and had the appearance of a grocer or a plumber or any other unromantic kind of man? I wove fancies

about a nun whose name was Regina, who looked so pinched and grey, always ran furtively from job to job, and always lowered her eyes when I passed her. I wondered why she so frequently went up to touch the signpost which stood at the far end of Marietta's field, on which it said: "To Lucerne 300 Km." and "To Benwyl 3 Km.," touching it with a caress as though it was the crucifix? I wondered why it was that so many of us went a little queer, and above all, why it was all taken for granted.

I REMEMBER well when the English girl arrived. She came alone, as I had done, wearing a blue hat and a blue coat and carrying a case. I saw her as she walked down the path, looking up at the house, at the garden, at all the statues by the entrance, and I noticed how she observed the archangels on their pedestals inside the porch. Like me, she had been led down the lino'd corridor by Sister Bonaventura into the panelled reception room, and had been told to wait. Through the open door I could see her as she stood in expectation. No one rightly knew how she came to the gates of the Mystic Rose, and how she had heard of us and why she

had left her country. In imagination I saw a grey and sunless land, flat and wind-swept. There was something touching about this young woman having come across the sea in search of peace and detachment from the world. We were curious about her. One could not help wondering why, here and there, a human being should wish to separate herself from the herd and retreat from ordinary life. There was frequently an interesting reason. Filled with worldly curiosity, I asked myself what had been the influences at work to induce this perfectly ordinary English girl to hide herself inside a nunnery.

I felt that every time any one arrived we should rejoice and celebrate. It seemed a chilly welcome, and far too business-like, considering this was so marvellous a step up close to heaven; merely a formal talk with Mother Superior, credentials produced, and then . . . silence. Left to one's own devices! There was no one anywhere to hold out a hand, saying: "Be welcome, and fear not." But perhaps that was now considered unimportant. Each of us had in time to learn to live alone, even though living in a community.

The whole world changed for Mary as it had done for us all, as she closed the gates behind her. In the heat of one July day we were working out in the fields, side by side, each with a pitchfork, pulling apart the

hay which had got damp in the recent rain. Butterflies hovered around and poppies opened their petals wide. Mary had not spoken much as yet. Her French was poor and her German halting. Being English, everything must have been doubly strange to her, and she must have felt doubly apart from the others. Everything was new to her, of course, all she saw and all she did.

It grew unbearably hot towards midday, and when the tower clock struck twelve we were glad to rest in the shade of the haystack, eating our crust and our dish of spinach pie. None of us had ever worked with a pitchfork before and our backs were aching and our hands had blistered. Yet being in the open like this, the three of us, Stephany joining us too, we were quite happy. We were hungry, too. The river close by roared underneath a wooden bridge and broadened out into a wide and shallow pool. It tempted us. We did not talk, for silence was imposed until half-past twelve. Mary knelt beside the crystal-clear water and cupped her hands to drink. I vividly see this scene before me now, for it was then that the devil entered our Eden and tempted us to sin.

"It's queer," said Stephany after we had eaten, "we three working here alone like this . . . and to know how easy it would be to walk away and take the steamer

to La Croix where all the English tourists are. I often wonder why one remains against one's inclinations. Is it, I wonder, by the grace of God alone? I wish I knew, don't you? What do you think, Mary?"

Mary looked very hot and tired, and beads of moisture glistened on each side of her freckled nose and her hair clung to her temples.

"I am sure I don't know," she said in a charming accent, very foreign, very outlandish. She blushed a little. Mary was something new to us as yet, an individual still. Longing, as we had done and still tried to do, to give up all desire and to perfect herself, and at present finding it most difficult.

She closed her eyes as she lay back on the ground and smiled a little. It was sweet, this peace, this sky, these mountains and . . . this martyrdom. But we were not supposed ever to day-dream at the Mystic Rose. After our midday meal we were pledged to read our breviaries, which we carried about with us in our pockets. But Mary was new, and, being English, she had an innocence which was above restrictions. She sat up again, looking dreamily across the water: then she rose, in so doing dropping the biggest part of her crust, and looked up and down the field where other nuns and novices had been working and were also resting now. She saw that they were some distance off, al-

most out of sight below a rise. We were at a bend of the river.

We had a glimpse though, through the pine-trees, of the warning spire of the church, but it failed to remind us at that moment of the state to which our Lord had called us. Mary lay down again beside us, and then slowly and quite casually and quite innocently she began to unbutton her gown, remove her starched cap, and then, as if it were the most natural thing to do, she also removed her boots and her galoshes and her underclothes, exposed her slim limbs, still brown from a bygone summer, and quite coolly she raised her eyes and said: "Come along, you two, quick." And so we, the three of us, committed our first, completely unregretted, mortal sin, by removing our clothing, exposing our naked bodies to the sun, and then to the water.

What secret joy we experienced beneath that blue heaven, as we crept along the ground like eels and plunged our bodies into the pool, no one can imagine who has never had to wear the clothes of a novice. We were almost dizzy with delight. The past grew more unreal, it was only the present that mattered now. Gone were the thoughts of purity, of death and purgatory, of deadly sin and hell. Gone were the thoughts of good and evil. There was, or seemed to be, more



meaning in the touch of the mossy stones beneath our naked feet than in all renunciation. I noticed that Stephany's face had grown tenderer than I had ever seen it before. It had lost the expression of slightly haughty sulkiness, and she was laughing softly.

We did not speak or make a sound. Everything was jubilant until the church clock struck another quarter, and then instantly we remembered our crime and were filled with fear and, strangely enough, not a little shame. We were conscious of our nakedness. We had, like Eve in paradise, eaten of forbidden fruit. Stephany's and Mary's bodies, as they crawled back to the haystack ahead of me, shimmered in the sun like silk. But now, as we hastily dressed again, not daring to stand up to do so, the spell was broken. Nemesis was at hand. We had scarcely risen to our feet and replaced our caps, and Mary was still fastening her boots, when a shadow fell across the grass.

Sister Gabriella stood before us, her arms piously folded, her lips tightly compressed. She had not seen us bathe and it was a thing even she would never have suspected, but she sensed that we were feeling guilty.

"Whose crust is this?" she said, pointing to Mary's piece of bread lying in the grass.

"That's mine, sister," said Mary.

"May you never be in want," Sister Gabriella said

solemnly, and gravely crossed herself. "And you," she pointed to Stephany, "your hair is wet. Why is your hair wet?"

"It's very hot, Sister Gabriella."

"And you," she pointed to me, "fasten your bodice properly . . . and now go to work."

Stephany, whose face now turned to loathing, picked up her fork and turned her back. Her gown was wet and clung moistly to her undried body. Mary's gown, too, was moist, and fragments of hay stuck to the cloth. Still, even in her wildest dreams, Gabriella would not have suspected us of doing what we had done. She merely shook her head and walked away; but there was something odd, something watchful in her expression. She was suspicious and we knew we should never dare to bathe again. We had been mad to do it. We might so easily have been seen; a thing which did not bear thinking of, for in an event like this there would have been no humour and no tolerance at the Mystic Rose. We might have been expelled.

The heat grew more unbearable daily and we grew afraid of the river. It was not the devil, but the river, that was tempting us. But even so it was pleasant working in the open with each other, and I shall always remember the hour's siesta with half an hour's liberty to talk. Not that we talked very much. One grows

afraid of words in nunneries: of saying something which might sound like gossip or probing into others' privacy. Once, for instance, we talked of food. It was really very bad, meagre and tasteless beyond imagination. And there was the question of hygiene, too. It was farcically squalid, for there was never time or opportunity for any one to wash her hair or to have her teeth attended to unless they had to be drawn and replaced with false ones.

"Oh, let's change the dreary subject," said Stephany after we had prayed and placed the bowl of beans between us. "Let's talk of love, instead."

"Why?" said Mary cautiously.

"Heaven only knows," Stephany yawned. "Only, I don't see why not. That part of our life is dead, anyway, dead and done with."

Mary was inspecting her hands, her broken finger nails, but she did not speak. She was thinking of the secrets tucked away in her memory. Perhaps it had only been a dream: her girlhood spent in a convent school in Sussex, her father marrying a second time after her mother's death, and then, Jim coming to her that night after they got engaged . . . and his eyes staring out of death after the accident with his plane.

A deep black cloud began to cover the sun, and the vineyard looked a much darker green. But hush, not a

word about love, not here, not now. Wake up, there are the beans to be eaten, and the breviary to be read. But Stephany was speaking again.

"You know, I am afraid sometimes; we all are, I think. Aren't you?"

"I am not," said Mary, "not now, not any more." Pointing to the river, she added: "I wish I could lie on the water and float away on it, on and on, everlastingly."

Now everything was still. The farmyard rooster pierced the stillness and the church bell tinkled. Mary rose and picked up her fork, and added: "It's funny, but I have always hated change, even as a child. I wanted nothing more than peace and permanency; and we are sure to get that here."

In the distance, Father Anthony, in his long black cassock, stood talking to a peasant who had come round for the loan of our huge black boar. It was always Father Anthony who transacted business as delicate as this. Nuns' faces peered up from beneath their veils, observing the adored, slim but athletic soul-guide standing in the shade of a tree bargaining in their interest, and they set to work with redoubled energy.

"Heavens," Mary sighed once during Silence, "I wish I were a mermaid."

"That," whispered Stephany with a smile, "it must be admitted, is a worldly wish for a would-be nun to have."

We generously put such frailties down to the sun and the sweet smell of hay and the humming of the insects. Summer days at the Mystic Rose were known to be disturbing. Grasshoppers would go hopping over our galoshes as we walked home for vespers thinking of to-morrow, Saturday, when the three of us would have to confess and would be cleansed of our still somewhat unregretted sin.

We grew increasingly afraid. Indeed, in the face of our teaching we did not know how we had dared to do a thing like this, what could have possibly possessed us to do it. Yes, there was no denying it, the three of us were the least pious of the lot. Even so, we felt kindly and full of understanding towards all the others, and in many ways convent life was dear to us. As Mary said, it left one free to indulge in memories.

"I am sorry though," said Mary suddenly as we were trudging home from work, referring to the bath. "It was my fault. After all, I am the oldest of us three and it was my suggestion. It was the river, and being near the earth. That makes you feel a kind of pagan. Irresponsible!

"It isn't," she went on a little later, "that I don't

believe in the need of having Spartan rules in a convent and in the purely mystical life. I do. I don't rebel against that; you know that, don't you?" she pleaded.

"Oh, be quiet!" said Stephany. "We know exactly how you feel and we are to blame as well as you. The sins of the flesh," Stephany quoted flippantly to herself as we marched on in silence, "the sins of the flesh, indeed!" But there was no denying that the three of us were secretly afraid of a very angry God.

Well, here we lived and had to conform, and on Saturday afternoon we were given a rest from haymaking to unburden our consciences. Full of anxiety, we had crept to bed and spent a restless night, and now Father Anthony was installed in his horse-hair chair behind the threadbare curtain listening to countless venial sins. Mary knelt beside me in the chapel, waiting for her turn. There was no sound. It was pleasant and it was restful, kneeling in the cool, dark chapel out of the hot afternoon sun. I felt very anxious and my instinct was to flee. We all felt like that at times of course. But where could one flee to? Hapsberg, I knew, was not very far from Benwyl; but surely, I argued with myself, one could not go home again after so bravely renouncing the world? It was silly, really, to be so agitated about so venial a sin. But was it venial? It was not for me to say. It was for the priest

to decide. I argued with myself that we did not take refuge in a convent in order to be afraid of things we had had no inkling of when we were still outside. Even Mary, the calm English girl, sighed now and then as she knelt by my side. Stephany had not yet arrived. It would not be her turn until after vespers.

More and more agitated nuns filled the chapel. One would hardly credit it, but the occasions for sinning even here in this our hermitage were still plentiful. By the flicker of the altar lamp hot hands were being dipped in holy water. I saw hands folded, or toying with beads. Then it was my turn. Coming through the door from the pharmacy Melanie stood and held it open for me to pass. On her face was an expression of almost paradisaal contentment. She seemed to walk on air with a kind of spiritual repletion. But Melanie was good.

Now I was alone with the priest. I felt curiously guilty. Perhaps this was the kind of sin that sent one to perdition? I knelt down beside him and summoned up my courage to speak. Feeling that I was agitated, he proceeded to help me out a little and I told him all.

"You did what?" he asked at last, as though he had not properly heard.

At great length I had to explain it all again, in detail. He had insisted on the detail. Details were, after

all, important in a case like this. Then it was he who was silent. He leaned back in his creaking chair and presently began to mutter to himself. He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped his brow.

This evidently needed thinking over. At last, however, he spoke.

"This is the most shocking thing I have ever heard," he said. He sounded rather angrier than usual. "The whole thing . . . why . . . I can hardly believe that any one with your training would forget herself like that: would do something so unwise, so scandalous even, so highly improper. Those who go naked as you have done, why, my child, they are not unlike the beasts who know no better. Was this your suggestion?" he then wanted to know, and I said: "No." I could see him quite distinctly once more mopping his brow, but what went on in his head was difficult to guess. His voice grew gentler though, he was not angry any more.

"Do you mean to tell me that you never even hesitated? That you acted on an impulse, and that you never thought of giving offence to others by your nakedness, by breaking the sixth commandment, and by breaking the sacred rules of the Order? And now are you truly filled with contrition?"

Was I?

"Yes, father."



"Like children," he added, as if to himself, with an audible sigh. Then he leaned over on his *prie-dieu* and covered his face with his hands as though he, and not I, were the true penitent. He began to pray, and presently he turned to me and said: "I will believe in your good faith, and now go and sin no more," and his voice sounded rather weary, as if he spoke less with condemnation than with compassion. "And for your penance, pray twelve Our Fathers, and now go in peace."

It was all over. Father Anthony had been very lenient. With a feeling of tremendous relaxation I rose, walked across the room, and knelt beside Mary, who sat there with her eyelids closed. I nudged her and told her it had gone off well. She smiled faintly.

The waiting nuns began to recite the rosary and their murmured responses were like the wind in the trees. When that was over I still had some time to spare and I went up into my cell to wash my face. There was such a sense of peace at this hour up in the dormitory. One was at least alone up there. Looking from my window I saw a man on horseback stop by Regina's signpost and, for some inexplicable reason, wave his hand towards the convent. Suddenly, it was as if life were calling me back and a tremendous longing for the old life tugged at my heart. And as I thought of home I remembered my diary, which I had

forgotten and had failed to destroy. I went down on my hands and knees and took it out from underneath the floorboard. My diary which knew so much, the romantic figure I had once thought myself to be almost two years ago, my earlier disgust with a life I had not properly appreciated, the drunken joy of walking on consecrated ground, my new desire for detachment, and then those moments when the heart got in the way and I thought of John and home and mother.

But what was I grieving about? The world was still here, as it always was. I had not really left it. It was all around me even now, the sweet smell of hay; and soon it would be autumn with its fruit harvesting and its golden shadows. And now there was Mary, whom I liked, and Stephany, and Father Anthony whom I, like all the rest of us, adored for something I was too young to understand, to analyze. Then my mind switched over to the nuns, Sister Victoria, Sister Hedwig, who had remained so sane, so sweet, so happy; and Father Joseph, who had sent word that my first poem I had written on a piece of grease-proof paper in the kitchen would be printed in the quarterly paper of the convent, of which he was the editor; and Sister Ursula, who said that I might play the organ in the autumn during Benediction and teach two children from the school. Things were getting more interesting.

Then I thought of Sister Cornelia, and how not long ago I had heard Ann, the lady doctor, say to her when she was lying sick in bed: "Every one in this unhappy house has broken faith with nature."

She had spoken solemnly and I had not been able to forget. I thought of Sister Bonaventura, too, who seemed to know no sin. I liked her very much. She was so roguishly demure with her tiny waist, her mole, her spreading skirt. She was brimming with life. There was no reason, I told myself, why I too should not become a very happy nun. Having lived with them all on terms of intimacy for nearly twenty months I knew them fairly well and did not sentimentalize them now. Yet . . . I did not feel at peace. And I was periodically afraid of God, of hell, of everything.

At dawn, as Father Anthony walked from one communicant to another by the altar rail, repeating: "Corpus Domine nostri Jesu Christi . . . in vitam aeternam, amen," and eventually came to me, holding the ciborium above my head, his eyes met mine with kindness and, I thought, special understanding. I felt once more at peace.

ONE night I awoke for no reason at all. Far away in the distance I heard a bull bellowing against the hills. Through my open window I could see the still black sky. It was very early, no cocks were crowing yet, and suddenly the tower clock struck two, boom . . . boom. . . . Then I heard scores of mice scurrying along the dormitory floor and Sister Cornelia's bed creaking loudly in the cell next door. She was always restless. I was for ever frightened of the night, for it was then that I saw everything in a different light and I would make plans to get away and back to Hapsberg; but once it was light I felt my usual self again and quite established, almost as if I had been at the Mystic Rose for ever.

It was my turn that night to take my place at three o'clock with Sister Martha at the foot of the cross in the private chapel. As I was unable to sleep I decided to get dressed. I crept out into the lavatory, where there was a tap with an enamel cup attached from which we were allowed to drink when thirsty in the night. It was pitch dark in the dormitory, yet I thought that I saw a dim form moving against one of the windows. There seemed to be shadows everywhere. Boots

were placed on top of the cells' dividing walls and gowns and stockings hung or flung across the tops of doors, filling the air with a medley of smells not unlike those of a stable. As I stood beneath the tiny gas-jet which was kept alight above the water-tap I heard footsteps moving hurriedly away down the passage towards the second staircase where we kept our galoshes. It was not a staircase we often used. But there was nothing strange in that, as every one at sometime or other seemed to walk in her sleep. But as I returned to my cell I saw that Sister Cornelia's door was wide open, swinging gently in the wind. She was not there; yet she was supposed to be ill and feverish again, especially at night. I decided to follow her. So I tiptoed down four flights of highly polished stairs in my felt slippers, and up a perambulatory corridor to the domain of Sister Bonaventura.

I could see the stairs shining now through the windows in the cloisters and a new moon peeping through a cloud. It was summer still, but it had been raining and was chilly. Cornelia was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps she had gone to the pharmacy to get an aspirin. All was in darkness except for a tiny night-light, a mere floating wick which was lit every night and kept burning by the front door to guide the lonely watchers by the altar. The golden frames of Father Norbert's

paintings shone whitely in the ghostly light, and there by the door in the shadow of the statue of St. Francis stood Sister Cornelia, completely dressed and wrapped in her thick black winter shawl. Under her arm she held a parcel, a bundle rather, a white, stuffed pillow-case. She was leaning heavily against the wall.

"It's you," she said with a tremendous sigh, as though she had expected the devil himself. "How you frightened me." She sighed once more, clutching her bundle as though I might wish to rob her of it. Perspiration shone on her fine, thin nose and on her sunken cheeks, and there were tears in her eyes. The French clock in the reception room struck half past two, and a moment later the tower clock boomed as well. Cornelia smiled a little and came from her corner towards me, saying: "Well, my dear, and what are you going to do about it?"

"Do about what? What do you mean?" I asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Aren't you going to sound the alarm?" she wanted to know, as she deliberately stepped back again into the shadow of the statue. "You must act according to your conscience. . . . I shall understand. For, you see, I am going away . . . forever. I was just going to leave, now, hoping to go unobserved, when I heard your footsteps."

"But you can't," I said foolishly, genuinely horrified. "Why, you are ordained, you have vowed to God."

"Yes, yes, I know," she said simply as she came towards me where I stood with my back to the door. She reached for the bolt and drew it back. I felt frightened and rather responsible. It was as if I were taking part in her flight. She looked at me, and I could see that in spite of her decision there was no treachery in Cornelia, that it had cost her a great deal to come so far, and that if she had not become tubercular she would not now be hastening away in the night. I held her back, grabbing her by the wrist, for it struck me that I might be mistaken and that she was acting strangely only during a bout of delirium. But her hand was cool. She turned and looked at me; I could but dimly see her face.

"I must go," she said. "You could not stop me now, no one could. . . . You see, I have no desire now for renunciation . . . or for death. I am getting better, but I must go now . . . at once, before it is too late."

I shall always remember her face as she stood before me then, looking lovelier than before, more alive. Gone was the look of resignation and gone the look of fear. Then she stepped out into the porch, where she stopped and touched my shoulder.

"Thank you," she said, "and don't think too badly of me."

I could see her veil billowing in the breeze as she hastened towards the gates, still in her slippers, carrying all her earthly possessions under her arm, a bundle of underclothes. By the gate she walked more slowly. She saw that the sky grew lighter over in the east and knew that with the coming dawn her self-sought martyrdom was over. The iron gate creaked loudly on its hinges, and Barry, who was chained to his kennel by the stables, gave a howling bark or two.

I felt guilty. But what good would it have been to hold her back? Indeed, she belonged to us no more. It was clear that she would have remained against her will, her faith even, and her judgment, which she must have been slow in forming. She was outside now, in the big world. She was Sister Cornelia no longer, but plain Kate as she had once been before. Her thin hands and cheeks would fill out again with care and rest and food and all the other aids to health, and her fair, shorn hair would be long again and silken. But would she ever know peace again? And how would she fare for money? As far as I knew she had no home to go to. It was almost frightening to realize how easy her break with the Mystic Rose had seemed to be.

I heard her firmly close the rusty gate behind her



and then, quite clearly, I heard a motor car free-wheeling down the path leading to the "Adam and Eve" and the road to Benwyl. I closed the door behind her, but I could not get her out of my mind. Nor could I later when I knelt in chapel and the clock struck three, one of the teaching nuns kneeling beside me; a young, bespectacled woman who would have loathed me had she known how little I had fought to hold Cornelia back. She was one of the non-attached kind, the kind that has practised austerity, extreme asceticism, to such an extent that to some of us who found it far more difficult it was almost horrifying. She was the most exemplary of nuns, fond of teaching, born to spinsterhood, cold, and apparently without a vestige of enthusiasm; dead, but quite healthy in body and in mind.

I thought of Cornelia as we mechanically prayed for the outside world. I remembered that in my first summer at the Mystic Rose, when she was still well, she had sat beside me on the hay-wagon; both of us dangling our legs, both of us laughing at our ugly, badly fitting, low-heeled boots and our hand-knitted, thick black stockings. And now I should always remember her walking out into the wet garden, looking back once more, as she closed the gate behind her, up at the convent which had housed her for seven years. She had looked both brave and timid, had seemed breathless

and calm and sad, as well as happy.

Her flight had a bad effect on me. I felt as though I could no longer be sure of myself or of anything else. I went back to bed at four o'clock for another hour, but I could not sleep. It was already growing light and slowly the sky was turning red.

SISTER CORNELIA'S place in the queue which we formed on our way to early Mass was empty. Someone ran up to fetch her, but as she was not in her cell no further notice was taken of her absence. Later, as she did not appear at breakfast, it was taken for granted that she was laid up again and that Father Anthony would have to be notified to take Communion to her. Sister Hedwig missed her first, the nurse and keeper of the pharmacy. She had found her rosary, her crucifix, and her breviary on the bedside chair. The bed was made up, the sheets removed, and the drawers empty. Pinned to the ebony cross was a note for Mother Superior, written on a sheet of paper stolen from the office. Sister Hedwig involuntarily ran to the open window, not really knowing why, as though Sister Cornelia might have leaped from it, or the river in the

middle distance might perchance give her up.

She took the letter from the cross and went down to the office and handed it to the reverend mother, who almost snatched it from her hand. Every one knew at once what had happened. Doors were banged, cupboards were more violently shut, bells rang with more vigour, and young nuns felt strangely excited. Throughout the convent, women of all ages were thinking of the outside world, their past, or their lost youth, or whatever nuns think about when thoroughly disturbed.

Sister Cornelia had left only a line for the reverend mother to read: "Try to forgive me. I thank you very much for everything, but I have only one desire now, and that is to get well again." The nuns in the office looked at one another, too shocked at first to speak. The incident, the flight of a nun, one of themselves, was, it seemed, too much for them. They sat down together, the assistant mother, Sister Gabriella, Sister Hedwig, and the prefect, all of them wringing their hands.

"Like a thief in the night," the reverend mother kept repeating. "Like a thief in the night."

"What are we to do?" asked Sister Gabriella. "We can't hush it up."

"No. I wish we could," the reverend mother sighed,

looking very red in the face.

"It will be a bad thing for the novices, a very bad thing indeed," said Sister Gabriella.

It was like a challenge, they all thought, as they sat silently round a circle. And they were curious, too.

"It's that woman, that Dr. Ann," the reverend mother said. "I have never trusted her."

She rose resolutely, went over to the telephone, and summoned Father Anthony. Yes, they had taken it too much for granted perhaps, she remarked to the others as they sat waiting for the priest, too much for granted that no one would ever break a vow.

No one ever knew what Father Anthony said behind those office walls. It remained a secret. A broken vow! It did not bear thinking of; a vow that was as irrevocable as death. "Perhaps she will be struck dead," a novice of the peasant class whispered to another by the water-tap, her eyes goggling with suppressed excitement.

We novices were told by Sister Gabriella to pray for her. Our concern was to be with her immortal soul, not with her body, and we were never to mention her name again.

At the entrance to the dining-hall we sprinkled ourselves with holy water. Eighty odd hands dipped into the tiny vessel by the door; and as we did this we hoped

that all worldly thoughts, all multiple thinking, which were of the devil, would henceforth be scattered.

But it did not work. Stephany, who never seemed hungry, was rolling her bread between her fingers, making pellets; and while a nun was droning away reading the sermon which, with us, took the place of pudding, Mary looked out of the window, from where she saw the river. The river would now always be with us, and so would the memory of Cornelia. We were leading the most glorious life there was on earth, the woman in the pulpit read, far from the lures of the world and its temptations. We knew that she was wrong. Then there followed prayers of thanksgiving for the food received, and then the clatter of cheap crockery and tin spoons. A little subdued, we trooped into the sewing-room for a stretch of indoor work.

I was putting the finishing touches to a purple stole which Father Anthony was to wear on Sunday. Each went silently to her task: the teaching nuns to correct the children's books, a few into the vineyards; but wherever we went we thought of Sister Cornelia and wondered what kind of life she would lead now, if she would find it strange to substitute another life, and if she would possibly have any regrets.

I was indeed disturbed. Who was I? What was I? I brooded, living here among all these women, finish-

ing my life among the mountains, the fir-trees, and this huge fortress of a nunnery . . . and not yet twenty-one. Never again to mix with other people, never again to talk when I felt like talking, or to eat what I longed to eat. Then I thought of John, whom I had wilfully cast from my mind, and I pictured him standing under the yew-tree by the entrance to the church where sightseers often lingered as we all walked by; and I thought of marriage and of having sons and daughters and being loved by them.

Beneath a statue of our Lady sat Marietta, sewing too. Nothing, I thought, had any power over her; she would never be swayed like me; and now, in this new and critical mood, I thought her very white and very pink and very silly.

At last the stole was finished and I thought of Father Anthony who would wear it on Sunday and would kiss the cross which I had embroidered in the centre with golden thread. As I put it away in the cupboard where all the finished work was kept I quickly kissed it too. It was, I knew, a silly, sentimental thing to do.

Marietta rose as the Ave bell was ringing, and put her chair back in the row of empty chairs and spread the dust-cloth over the Singer sewing machines. She smiled at me and fell in with me on our way to church. Instead of praying, I thought of the early dawn and

Sister Cornelia and of myself and how difficult it was to desire this dream with everlasting courage. I thought of changelessness, and early death, and of drifting along without aim, and of all these women whom, in spite of their familiarity, I did not really know. I watched them as they stood up after the priest had risen. Thus another day drew to its close. A few of us looked up into the sky as we walked back to silence and to bed, but most of us looked down.

It was better on the following day, when Sister Roberta inspected my stole and said that it was well done and that, as a favour, I could take it across to Father Anthony myself. I wrapped it up carefully in white tissue-paper, and as I walked out with it tucked underneath my arm I nudged Stephany who, like the rest of them, envied me my errand, for she, too, greatly admired Father Anthony. I went slowly down the cobbled yard, past the stables, and knocked at the door of his house. For a long time there was no answer, but at last I heard approaching the door the shuffling feet of Sister Magdalena, a very old nun who acted as his housekeeper.

She opened it a fraction of an inch and said: "What d'you want?" She did not seem to trust me, and opening the door unwillingly she took me upstairs to the study and casually announced me to the priest. My

wandering eyes showed me a study so full of books that it made my heart throb with a kind of envy. No wonder the priest was mentally alive.

Father Anthony, wearing his hair rather long over the back of his collar, sat writing at his desk. His grandfather clock ticked loudly, and creaking floorboards outside on the landing told me that it was true what was said of Sister Magdalena, that this terrible Cerberus was listening or even watching at the keyhole. Everybody, even the priest, knew that she did that. It did away with unnecessary visitors and private conversations and, no doubt, with jealousy, and was bound to save the priest a certain amount of trouble.

I watched Father Anthony writing steadily and felt a little annoyed with him for letting me stand there so long to glance over his room. It was so silent, so comforting, so utterly private, except, of course, for the woman at the door. It contained some comfortable chairs, and a thick grey carpet covered the floor. These were purely worldly comforts; worldly but attractive.

At last he rose and said: "Well, and what can I do for you, my child?"

"I've brought you the purple stole I have been making."

"Ah, yes, do sit down."

So he undid the parcel, glanced at the stole, and then



held it up to the light, and I could see that he liked it very much. He examined every detail of design and workmanship.

"Well done," he said, turning to me; "shows originality. . . . Now let's see, you have been with us almost two years now. Are you happy here?"

How nice, I thought, for once to be able to talk to someone wise and strong and masculine, and I wanted to make the best of it.

"Happy?" I said. "Sometimes yes and sometimes no."

"Ah, just so, just so, that's how we all feel, of course."

This, I felt, was not very encouraging, yet I wanted to prolong my visit, to remain sitting on that soft chair, and to stretch out my hand for all the books covering the walls. But it was clearly time for me to go. He picked up the stole once more, and said: "Just wait a moment, I will bless it now, and then you can take it across to the sacristy and hang it in the glass case with my other things." So while he blessed the stole, mumbling some Latin prayer, I noticed his fine fountain pen, his expensive typewriter, his antique *prie-dieu*. But all the time I heard the creaking of the floor-board on the landing.

The ceremony over, Father Anthony kissed the embroidered cross in the centre of the stole where I had

kissed it the day before. This was a delicate attention, even if not meant for me, and I felt suddenly gloriously and absurdly happy. As he handed me the stole, he said: "Thank you very much," and, without looking at me, "Good morning!"

So he had escaped me, and my hoped-for talk had come to nothing! He always escaped us in this way, except occasionally at confession, when he sometimes entered into our moods. On the landing I was met by the nun, who showed me out and slammed the door behind me. But I could not forget Father Anthony's room. I, too, wanted things around me now, possessions, things I had once sneered at, things I had renounced, books, plenty of books and *objets d'art* and carpets and lamp shades and soft chairs. He was a priest, a monk, and he, too, had renounced the world, but not so thoroughly as we. We had no comfortable chairs. We sat upright, and if we had not got the strength we were sick and went to bed.

As I passed the altar with the stole I sternly reminded myself that I had accepted and embraced eternal poverty. I hung the purple emblem in a case which was filled with white, gold, and crimson robes and vestments and heavy, folded canopies. On top of the case was a selection of plaster saints and Madonnas covered with dust-sheets; and in another glass case,

safely locked away, stood the golden crucifix, in the centre of which was an enormous valuable ruby surrounded by a mass of tiny diamonds. This was the "Sterbekreuz," which was carried to the dying to be kissed. I, too, would kiss it some day. Or would I?

I had to hurry now, back to the sewing-room to do some mending. But I was growing afraid of that room, with its closed windows, its smell of unwashed bodies, of unwashed gowns, its silence continually disturbed by coughing. So many who were tubercular were sent in there because it was a restful occupation. As I came in every one glanced up at me and then at the clock. I had been away exactly twenty minutes . . . with Father Anthony.

I told Sister Roberta that he was pleased, and she told the room at large that his reverence was pleased, and then we all went on again, stitching and coughing as before.

The haymaking season was over and winter would soon be at hand, with months of indoor work, broken only by constant prayers, those prayers which we sent to heaven for the sake of the whole of the world whose burdens we had so selflessly taken upon our shoulders. There was at the Mystic Rose, as at other nunneries, no intellectual side. It was not as it is in monasteries, where monks forgather to philosophize, to argue even,

or to interest themselves in history, in science, or in psychology. There was with us never any time to read. We were there to pray and to work patiently and without complaining. After all, what were world affairs? I well remember suggesting to one of the teaching nuns on a Sunday afternoon that we should start a debating society. She was clearly horrified. She was right. After all, what was there to debate? A man or a woman should be able to contemplate without controversy and without private views. Subjects like: "What is known about hell-fire?" for instance, interesting though they might have been, would have been too much for us. Hell was real to most of us and far more frightening than war. It was a wholesome fear. It made for purity and it also made for peace.

There was, of course, the quarterly magazine, to which Father Joseph contributed some of his wonderfully simple stories. Always the same story really, about some immensely virtuous, exemplary "child of Mary" who made good in life. A young woman quits the world or resists the usual kind of temptation, starves for her convictions, or does a vast amount of manual labour without complaining, and then is rewarded by having visions of the Virgin; wins eternal salvation, and arrives ultimately at a state of absolute perfection. There were some illustrations, too, drawn by Sister

Gabriella, entitled, "The Good Samaritan" or "The Shepherd," and on the last two pages the events of the Mystic Rose were described by Father Joseph; events such as the sickness in the pigsty and the death of Sister Gonzaga. The parents were the chief subscribers to it. It was said to make them very happy. We read it during recreation.

It was during recreation, too, while walking up and down the cloisters ending at the bottom of the garden, where we could not so easily be overheard, that we debated many things by ourselves, Stephany, Mary, and I. It was our only opportunity together. Otherwise we were kept apart. Our friendship was against the rules, for friendships were, of course, discouraged. They were looked upon as being dangerous. We had opinions, and sometimes we felt doubtful and we were unable, in spite of our teaching, to decide what was right and what was wrong. I liked to hear Mary talk in her casual English way of why she thought living in a nunnery was best for someone who wanted to forget, who was naturally religious, and attracted by mystical things. She had always been attracted by mysticism in spite of being very fond of hockey. There was nothing like living in a rut in a place where one day was like another, as alike as two drops of water, to make time fly. And that was what she wanted, what

they both wanted, she and Stephany. Mary was most tolerant and took things as they came, and she could not find it in her heart to criticize. It was an ideal, she often said. It was certainly not perfect, but things were not meant to be. Of course, she had not expected our life to be quite like this. Nuns in England had more freedom and slightly better food. But she was going to stay, whatever happened. She had always wanted to live a life like this ever since her fiancé was killed. Then Stephany added that she too would never dream of leaving now. There were things which she thought were false and which she did not like; the eternal talk about purity, for instance, and the insufficient food, and the lack of proper hygiene; but in spite of this she, too, saw the underlying ideal, and she did not think she was a subject for tuberculosis, and she did not think she would some day become one of the mental ones, or that she would ever walk in fear of the devil. Our generation, she said, was too sane for that. We all solemnly agreed to that with more than ordinary conviction. Some day, thought Stephany, she would become an influence at the Mystic Rose and advocate smaller profits and better food.

RAIN fell steadily on our crops and vineyards, as well as on those in the distance belonging to some Protestants. Sister Gabriella, who in her queer way seemed to like me, gave me permission to write a little story for the magazine. It was a great privilege. When it was finished—I had written it during recreation of course—I was allowed to take it to Father Joseph by myself. Sister Magdalena glared at me suggestively as I called again and asked to be shown in, this time to the other priest. Had I been a nun I should not have been permitted to call on him alone, but as I was still a novice the “risk,” according to their strange reasoning was not so great.

I found him in a study entirely lined with books. He rose from his *prie-dieu* and looked at me humbly as though he knew himself to be a miserable sinner. He asked me at once to be seated. (“On no account,” Sister Gabriella had said warningly as I left, “sit on the sofa.” A little puzzled by this order, I came to the conclusion that a sofa was evidently considered too inviting a place for a man and a woman when alone together.)

“That is a pretty little story,” he said, when he had

read it through. "A little sentimental, eh? Ah, well!" Then he sat himself beside me on the sofa, which I, being a mere woman, had naturally chosen. But Father Joseph was so guileless and so simple in his manner, looks, and speech that I gladly let him hold my hand.

"Well, my dear, and are you happy here at the Mystic Rose?" he asked, as Father Anthony had done. When I told him that I was not certain of my vocation he seemed to ponder. It was as if he, too, had been in conflict with his calling. He looked unhappy, a little nervous; and then suddenly he rose and quickly opened the door. Luckily for Sister Magdalena she was not there. Then he came back and took my hand again. He seemed to pity me. "Afraid God did not give you a vocation. Ah! . . . But you see, my child, you can't have it both ways. Whatever you will eventually decide will be all right with God. Never be frightened, my dear. God is infinitely more forgiving than we are. That's nice to know, isn't it?" And then slowly he released my hand.

As I rose to go he made the sign of the cross on my forehead with his chubby hot finger, adding: "Remember, my dear, it is not God's will that we should all become nuns and priests." Then he smiled an almost apologetic smile.

I was deeply touched by his simplicity. Filled with



the most unholy feeling of defiance I passed Sister Magdalena on the staircase and, ignoring her completely, went into the church to do some necessary cleaning there. I was not myself then. There seemed to be someone different in my place.

Perhaps I was, after all, one of these ordinary women of whom there were so many; just one of the common herd, unfit, it seemed, for a life of sacrifice; one of those who are merely following their instincts, in search of a mate, of conception, intending to fulfil the simplest of tasks—motherhood; not one of the chosen ones, not one of the coming Brides. I did not care.

It was raining steadily. The whole world seemed to be filled with rain, and when it poured like this it seemed to matter little where one was, inside a nunnery or out. It was when the sun shone that life called. But now the wind fluted over the tower and blew against the painted windows, setting up a moan in the belfry. "Ghosts!" said Sister Thérèse, one of the potty nuns, who was steadying the ladder I was on, crossing herself three times in quick succession. She wanted to kiss the crucifix which hung from her neck, but it got entangled with her apron and the ladder and she gave it up. "Have mercy on us!" she shouted loudly as I dropped the window-leather on her head. She turned

her pinched, white prison face up at me and there was real horror in her eyes.

She, too, had been day-dreaming according to her lights. We all did. Sister Thérèse had been at the Mystic Rose for nearly twenty years and the world inside or out held nothing but superstitious terror for her. And when Sister Pelagia came in, wet through in spite of the sacking she had tied over her head, looking like an evil apparition, Sister Thérèse turned deadly pale. Sister Pelagia bent low as she passed the altar, and then she very nearly toppled over. She was, she said, getting just a little shaky on her pins! The windows were clean again now but it still looked gloomy in the church, as there was a great deal of blue and green through which the daylight filtered sadly. Then Sister Pelagia rang the bell for vespers, and while the others prayed I thought of Father Joseph and what he had said, and of Sister Cornelia, whom I could still see passing through the gate like a shadow out into the night. It had been Dr. Ann who had taken her in, it was whispered, her car having left its tell-tale tracks on the muddy lane. There was now another doctor, a man, calling on one of the more seriously sick.

I too now wanted to elope as Sister Cornelia had done. But I was afraid. I was afraid, like Sister Thérèse, of both kinds of worlds. We all were. All the following week it still poured and we still worked in the sewing-room, doing drawn-thread work for a Parisian shop where English duchesses bought their hand-made linen gowns. I thought of home and change. When on Saturday I confessed my fears to Father Anthony he did not seem much interested. He listened without a word of comfort or advice and absolved me quite mechanically. It would have been better, I thought in my helplessness, to have walked out in the rain to see the hollyhocks.

We were all hysterical at times and Father Anthony knew it. Doubts of any kind simply had no right to exist, not here at the Mystic Rose. They were like the measles, every one had them at one time or another. Ah! but I was weary of the sobs which were always audible during Benediction, when every one was tired out; weary of hearing the uneasy cry of one or another of the nuns who was mortifying the flesh by sleeping on a bunch of nettles. I was weary of fasting, weary of the food, of our rat-infested dormitories; and I was

tired of contemplation. I wanted new horizons. Then again the voice of my conscience spoke and told me that I was sinning against the light, and presently it seemed to me that I had even ceased to know the difference between right and wrong.

On Sunday, when the sun came out again, I felt a little calmer. We all loved Sunday best. For one thing we were allowed to change our underclothes and stop in bed half an hour longer. As we knelt once more in our pews we grew proud of our noble calling and conscious of our dignity, our remoteness, of having broken with the world and the past. We realized that we were often envied our peace. There was also our Sunday dinner; veal pie made of the flesh of a calf that died or was killed so young that it was like eating gelatine. We did not mind. After all it was a strict nunnery and to us young veal represented the limit of worldly indulgence. It was meat, even though the portions were small. We ate, and then when we had washed up we talked and sat on the stone seats in the cloisters with our hands folded; or we walked between the flowerbeds thinking of the women from the village who had come to Mass to stare at us, going home to mind their crying babies, to be treated roughly by their men, to make ends meet.

In the shade of a chestnut-tree Sister Victoria had

gone to sleep sitting upright on an iron chair, snoring slightly. Several nuns were dozing here and there in unaccustomed idleness. There was a pond in the centre of the garden in which white water-lilies grew. Hardly a nun passed that pond without stopping, apparently to watch the goldfish, which were always getting sick and dying. In fact, they stopped to get a rare reflection of themselves. It was the only mirror in the convent of the Mystic Rose. This silent mirror of dark water reflected many faces on a Sunday afternoon—young ones mostly though—not yet free of vanity, and sometimes faces of older nuns, half dead and as indifferent and sick as the fish themselves, who gazed into the dusky pond without the faintest interest, mumbling as they shuffled along, mumbling heaven alone knew what.

Then all too soon the shadow of the church would fall across the garden and once more the vesper bell would ring and all was over, and silence and *pax Christi* replaced our vanities.

There followed a week of outdoor work, usually picking potatoes, mostly starting out at dawn, bending, bending until we grew so weary that we knelt in the wet clay to rest. The routine of these days was like a piece of machinery in which we were caught until there was in none of us a spark of worldly desire left. It was as a whole a peaceful round of completely un-

imaginative work which in the end left us too tired to think or to pray, too tired for anything, except perhaps to work out the days when our outdoor work would change to indoor work, or the days of plenary indulgences we had by now amassed with our everlasting dreadful patience.

There may have been a little discontent among us here and there occasionally when we happened to forget the divine reason why we were there, but soon even that died down. Nothing mattered in time; there was just work and sleep. It was what every one in the end wanted most, a little warmth and a few hours of forgetful sleep and, of course, continual assurance that our sacrifice was indeed acceptable to God and our youth was not going to waste in vain.

An unexpected thing happened shortly after. Sister Gabriella was walking along the cloisters one Sunday afternoon after vespers in that military way of hers when, without a trace of a smile, she turned to me and said: "I say, you, would you care to go on a trip to Benwyl to see one of the priests at St. Barnabas? They are taking the van in to-morrow morning."

"You are very kind," I said, feeling my heart beat. "I would love to go."

Once a year those of whom it was known or who made it known that they were seriously battling with

their souls or bodies were permitted to go in search of outside help. Hence this trip to Benwyl, where we hoped to have our difficulties removed. Just like that. In half an hour!

It was like visiting a dentist or a lawyer. It was most uncharitable to criticize a priest, even in thought, but some of us had felt that as a confessor Father Anthony had grown a little stale. I was wondering how Sister Gabriella guessed that I was in trouble with my calling, but she had looked at me as if she were wondering why I was there at the Mystic Rose at all. It was indeed a pleasant surprise to know that there were occasions when one or another was permitted thus to get another glimpse, if only for a moment, of the outside world.

Not that we were to see much of it! It was to be a kind of pilgrimage to the famous cathedral of St. Barnabas, where it was said eighteen confessionals were lined up against a single wall, every one of them in use at times. The Ford was fetched out from its shelter; a car built like a huge police-van, painted black, with seats on each side. I can see it to this day; eight or nine prim, pious women sitting in a row on each side, dressed so modestly, so shabbily in faded black, destitute of shape, and as depressing as a shroud. It was only Sister Pelagia who entered the van gaily, looking care-free and indifferent, whereas we others stood with

lowered eyes. When we were all seated the stable-boy, dressed in his Sunday clothes, slammed the door behind us. No one saw us off, of course. There was no gay and cheerful waving of hands. In fact, we were feeling somewhat ashamed of being in need of outside help, and all of us except Pelagia had sneaked out a little furtively into the cobbled yard at half-past ten. It was indescribably exciting, although we could not see a thing inside the dark van. The only light filtered in faintly through a perforated grid behind the driver. Sister Pelagia sat beside me, her bony knees joggling against mine. She was telling her beads. I wondered what it was that troubled her.

For over half an hour we travelled along the road to Benwyl. The reckless driving by our chauffeur tumbled us about in the dark. We clutched at whatever we could as we were thrown this way and that. Torn between fear and indignation we found it difficult to concentrate on our sins and shortcomings. On my left sat Melanie, who was, it seemed, the only one at peace with God, for she had not like the rest of us any need of spiritual guidance. We were merely taking her to hospital to have an operation.

Early at dawn she had been taken sick. I had seen her leaning against a pillar at Mass evidently in great pain. After the ceremony was over Sister Hedwig took



her to the pharmacy, laid her on the horse-hair sofa, and after some trouble with her four yards of skirt, located her stomach and carefully examined her. Her verdict was appendicitis. And Sister Hedwig was always right. It was amazing how this born doctor had become with years of practice an infallible diagnoser of appendicitis. She was unique, knowing, differentiating with never-failing accuracy between an acute attack and one that could be cured with herbal tea. There had been no fuss. Melanie's two night-gowns and her face-cloth were wrapped up in a parcel and she was bundled off with the rest of us. She was a little feverish and every now and then she heaved with nausea.

At the hospital of Benwyl they were quite used to strays from the Mystic Rose being brought along with this kind of trouble, the outcome of so much starchy food. "Lord, another one!" the young surgeon would say rudely. That was all. It pleased him, though, to send them off a fortnight later looking infinitely better than before and, yes . . . a little cleaner, too.

None of us talked of course on so serious an errand. Sister Juliana was with us too, also telling her beads; her enormous flat feet spread out like a golfer's, her rosary dangling between her knees as though it were a fishing-rod.

I wondered what she had on her mind. She probably had her battles too, less of the spirit, perhaps, to judge by her moody rendering of Gounod on the organ after vespers on a Sunday afternoon. Looking up as we silently approached Benwyl, Sister Pelagia sheepishly grinned at me. Poor Pelagia, she did not know how presently, once she stood in the open in the centre of the medieval little town, I was to feel ashamed of her. Her gown was dirty and so were her finger-nails; and somehow here outside the walls her moustache seemed infinitely more noticeable.

Our young driver drew up in the old market-place, looked at the tires, kicked them all in turn, adjusted something else, and then leisurely came and let us out. He made me think of a boy opening a hen-house.

We stepped out from our Black Maria just as prisoners would, each a little surprised that the world had gone on just the same without him and that it was not even moderately interested in his reappearance in its midst. Except the children. They walked around us in a circle, for the nuns of the Mystic Rose with their fantastic hoods were not often seen in public.

As we slowly went along, Melanie hanging heavily on my arm, a few working men crossed the road to the other pavement, joking suggestively about Sister Pelagia's moustache. One little urchin shuffled behind us,

making signs, imitating our walk, and holding his nose. I felt ridiculously conscious of myself and of my shabbiness.

The hospital was not far away, and there at the bottom of the steps we said good-bye to Melanie and wished her luck. She took her little parcel and went inside and we walked on. She would have a nice hot bath and a good long rest, and we envied her.

It was exciting, walking between shops and meeting tourists who were gazing at the medieval houses and alleys and turning round to look at "those quaint nuns," noting Pelagia walking ahead of our procession, her stockings sagging over her boots.

I felt tremendously susceptible to all around me. The nuns, though, walked along, their eyelids lowered, their hands tucked away inside their sleeves. We went to the very end of the street, glancing sideways at shop windows, turned up a hill, and came to the iron railings of the monastery of St. Barnabas. First, though, we paid our respects to the cathedral and peeped in at the door and genuflected. The reverend mother had said we were to ask for Father Nicholas; he was "good," a "clever confessor," whatever that might mean. He really listened to what you said, knowing that it was important to the penitent, however silly, thus making the penitent feel an interesting case.

In the Lady Chapel stood a huge statue of the Virgin crushing an enormous snake, almost as large as a python, beneath her dainty, naked heel. But time was short, and we decided to go across the road to see the monks. Sometimes they were quite sociable and showed their visitors round their gardens. We hoped for the best; for this was a heavenly privilege for us, to be out like this, a privilege which would probably never be granted again.

Stopping before a beautiful and very ancient carved door we rang the bell, and presently a lay brother opened the grille. He was colossal. Bending low, his huge prize-fighter's head, the exact colour of lard, filled the whole frame. He became aware of a number of virgins in nuns' garb, and there was no need to ask us what we wanted. As if by magic, he vanished, and the grille was closed, and we were left standing there for several minutes. Then the grid shot up again and the face was there once more.

"Is there any one special you are wanting?" the priest asked, lowering his eyelids.

"Could we have the reverend Father Nicholas?" coyly asked one of the nuns, who was nearest the door.

"Father Nicholas. Ah!" he mused. "Yes. I think he is in. I will send him along as soon as possible."

Then the priest lifted his eyelids, and his pale eyes

fell on Sister Pelagia, and registered faint surprise. Then he quickly slid back the shutter. He did it very silently, evidently used to the technique.

The birds sang in the monastery garden, and the sun came out, and it seemed difficult to concentrate on sin. The zeal and the power of Father Nicholas, according to Mother Superior, were well known. He knew men and women, having confessed many a grievous sinner in his time, and many a sentimental woman, too.

We knelt down once more and looked at the cathedral. There was an effigy of Christ crucified, a study in contrasts, in crude colouring, the hectic red of His oozing wounds and the putty-coloured body, shaded here and there with green. Gazing up upon such a realistic idol, one wanted to go out and worship the sun. Yet many people were kneeling there, especially children. It seemed a beautiful thing to me, to see them so trusting and so much at home in their belief.

Sister Ursula began to recite the litany: "O Jesus, purity of virgins, spare us from the snares of the devil." And then, quite promptly, Father Nicholas arrived.

He was a tall, thin man, and looked, I thought, a little bored, yes, and faintly theatrical, too, like an actor about to play Hamlet. Without looking up he entered the confessional which bore his name on a printed card, slammed the door behind him, and

cleared his throat to indicate that he was ready. The purple stole of office, worn while hearing confessions, was hanging from the rail surrounding his box. I saw it slowly pulled in by an invisible hand. Then we heard him murmur rapidly, getting the preliminaries over. Sister Pelagia, because she was the oldest, was the first to go.

While I knelt there for almost an hour to await my turn, I found it difficult to concentrate all that time on the state of my soul. I thought of many other things instead. My mind went back to Stephany, who would have liked to come with us, but Sister Gabriella had not considered it necessary. She certainly had her favourites. Not that Stephany had any difficulties of the kind I had. She was at the Mystic Rose for ever. There was no doubt about that. She had, so she said, got over her repugnance for the food, and her blood had got used to strange nourishment and her awful spots had now almost disappeared. She would be working in the sewing-room this morning, on a beautiful, fine linen table-cloth. Little would those English or American ladies guess, when they bought it in one of the elegant continental shops, that there were more than ordinary stitches woven in the lace, that with every thread drawn tight someone had sent up a prayer, someone had repressed a tear, or merely a sigh,

and someone had been coughing blood.

But this would not do. I had to concentrate on what lay before me now. It was a magnificent church I was kneeling in, apart from the effigy. In itself alone it was an approach to my religion. I did not like bare churches which were created "in an age of reason." That kind of reason had merely emptied them. And when I saw a painted dove upon the ceiling I remembered that this was Monday, a day dedicated to the mystery of the Holy Ghost. Every moment of that day, since long before dawn, I had asked for guidance, and sent innumerable prayers up to heaven. And the rosaries I had been reciting constantly! Even at work! Untold strength was to come of doing that. I had contemplated all the mysteries of my religion, had examined my conscience again and again, and I had thought of death and the day of judgment. Should I now, I wondered, if I rejected the call because I preferred life, be tormented with qualms of conscience, memories of what might have been, terrible haunting regrets? Should I walk in darkness and despair, and never have any luck in life, and never escape from a sense of guilt and ingratitude? But then, I was not rejecting the faith, I was only rejecting the call. Ah, but I knew that those who did that had to harden their hearts to many things which were part of their religion.

One could not successfully break with one and not with the other. Those who had tried had always failed. Yet I felt no enmity to my religion, only to what men had made of it. God was just. He would understand. But would He? He had held out His hand to me, and I was rejecting it. That was what it came to.

I thought of Adam and Eve, who had brought all that sorrow into the world by their ingratitude; and of Lucifer, whose false pride had cost him heaven. Was I not like them, offending God by my critical attitude to a religious life? That was how a soul was lost, like a fragment of a star lost in nothingness. But the priest would be able to help me now; this tall, magnificent-looking man, this well-known professional confessor. God would speak to me through him.

At last it was my time, and when I had entered the gilded confessional, which was decorated with cherubs blowing golden trumpets, I was soon telling the priest that I was anxious now to release myself from a provisional vow, and that I had lost my earlier inspiration, and that, with it all, I was afraid.

"Ah!" he said, as though that was just what he had expected of a novice. And then he turned to me. Although he could not see me he seemed to be wistfully surveying me, confident that he knew all that was passing in my mind. "You are free, my child, to do as you



wish, of course! It rests with you alone, with you and God. Remember that only few are chosen . . . maybe you are not one of them, after all.

"What was it," he wanted to know, "in the first instance, that made you wish to leave the world?"

I tried to remember that scene in my father's study on that rainy night, when I had felt my heart moved to become a nun. What had made me decide? I did not know or remember.

"I don't know, father. Emotion, perhaps . . . and being apparently forgotten by a man I loved."

"Emotion!" he said. "Ah! Do not imagine that we can do without emotion. It is a dull man indeed that knows it not. . . . And as for love. . . . It is of the earth!"

The priest paused as if to think.

"Dear child," he went on, "there is another love for such as you and me, a love far mightier than this . . . this passing call of the flesh. Ah! let it burn, my child. Let it burn into a holy sacrificial flame! Love of the spirit," he quoted. "Love at its highest!" Father Nicholas paused, took a little snuff, and he turned to me again. "What is mortal love, my child, what is it?" he hissed through the grid. "Vagrant, earthly love! A love whose end is what? . . . Satiety, my child, satiety and . . . death." He paused again, and then, sud-

denly, he sneezed. "There is holy matrimony, of course," he added in a different, flat tone of voice, "for those who have not been singled out. Our Lord, as you know, has deemed it worthy of a sacrament! Now pray to our Lady for guidance, my child, and remember . . . it rests with you."

And then he prayed. Beautiful Latin words fell softly into the dusk of the confessional and lulled me almost into a feeling of religious calm. I was absolved.

Two hours later we walked down the path back to our van, our boots crunching loudly in the gravel. It was a sunlit afternoon, and there was a smell of roasting meat floating from the monastery. I thought of Father Nicholas, and how he had not really been able to help me, and how he had left me cold. Was it because I did not really wish to be helped? They always told you that, that you did not really want to when you were in doubt.

By the market-place we passed an open-air restaurant, where gaily dressed people sat drinking beer and eating sausages. There was a tinkle of music from within, and the concerted yodeling of a troupe of

Tyrolean girls. Then three charabancs drew up alongside our Black Maria. Was this the foolish world I wanted to get back to? Ah, well, I would just wait and see a little longer.

The rest of our party certainly looked more cheerful and refreshed after a heart-to-heart confession, but Sister Pelagia yawned pitifully, with her mouth wide open. She was hungry. So were we. We had missed our dinner, and would now get nothing until vespers. The stable-boy, with his coat by his side, lay asleep inside the van, and we had to shake him first before he woke. He was feeling very peevish. He had had no dinner either. My last glimpse of Benwyl, before he slammed the door behind us, was the local hospital, and I vaguely wondered behind which of the many windows Melanie now lay.

Not a word was spoken on our journey back. Sister Pelagia mumbled, or seemed to converse with the spirits of the departed, while a sudden wind blew down the main road, rocking our flimsy van. When we arrived within our gates, Sister Bonaventura was clearing the table in the priests' dining-room, carrying their leavings out into the scullery on a tray. They had been eating river trout.

"Mother Superior wants to see you," she whispered, as she secretly offered me the tail-end of a fish behind

the open door. It was Silence, of course, but she did not care. "There will be meat once more to-morrow," she said with a wink. "That red heifer has just died."

"Hush! hush!" I said, and hurried along to the office.

"Well," said the reverend mother, not without curiosity, as she put away her pen, "and has the dear Lord given you light upon your pilgrimage?"

"Yes, thank you, your reverence."

She began to rummage in a drawer among a pile of papers. "There is a letter from your mother," she said. "It came last night."

That made me so happy that I wanted to shout. It was six pages long, a windfall after several months, for letters were rationed, of course. I tried not to show my pleasure, for we were always being told that there was this other mother now, the Virgin, who could be addressed every hour of the day, and was not likely to weaken a young woman's longing for oblivion. If my mother only knew, I thought, how my decision now weighed heavily upon me.

"By the way, my child," the reverend mother added, in a rather more friendly tone than usual, "there is some news about an Uncle Daniel of yours. He is dead. May he rest in peace." She then crossed herself, and I followed suit.

Uncle Daniel dead. And all his money lost to me

now. But what of it? It seemed hardly real to me now. An uncle dies, parents die, another tie is broken with the outside world. I hastily took the letter with me to the lavatory, as we were not supposed to read our mail during working time. It was exciting, it was unbearably exciting. "John had called and . . ." the rest was crossed out, censored, but it was enough. I raced down to Sister Victoria to help with the dish-washing. All my fatigue vanished, all my doubts seemed of no account, and Sister Victoria wondered why I was in so extravagant a mood as to refuse a cold potato "baked nicely in its skin."

I KNEW it was not the rats that ran over my pillow in the night, and I knew it was not entirely my present inability to pray so frequently with conviction, or the irksome duties and difficulties of communal life, its lack of solitude and privacy, or even my longing for life, which made me ultimately decide to run away. It was simply that I had not the stuff in me for that kind of martyrdom. I knew it was a mean, cowardly thing to do, deciding to sneak out of the convent by guile, "like a thief in the night," as the reverend mother had

said after Cornelia had left. Yet that was what I did. After all, one had not got to leave by force or at the point of a gun. One had to explain, though, to Mother Superior, and that would, I knew, take several days and become a minor inquisition. Parents would be informed first, and points discussed with Father Anthony.

As I looked from the window of my cell and saw the encircling walls beneath me, I wondered if it would be easiest to desert from the orchard when gathering fruit, or from the vineyard later in the month. It would be easiest from there, as it was closest to the forest. Or I might creep out, as Cornelia had done, a little before dawn, or I might remain behind in the church after Benediction. There would, of course, always be a risk. I decided to do it soon. Only I was terribly afraid of the wrath of God. It was indeed easier to decide to leave the world and enter a place of peace, than to leave such a place and go back into the world.

Why this is so is difficult to tell. One feels guilty, one feels a failure, outcast and unworthy. Besides, life would have to be faced again. I was also attached to many nuns, and I knew that they liked me, unworthy as I was. But then, I was young, and did not dwell on that for very long. The world, I felt, was still before me, not a bad world as a whole, indeed, a fascinating

world—in retrospect. I decided to confide in Stephany, and, perhaps, in Mary, too, and say good-bye to them the proper way.

For the last time I cut a hundred and sixty slices of bread for vespers, while Sister Victoria boiled the milk; and for the last time I listened to one of the nuns reading from a book of devotion, ending with: “The most important concern of man’s life, to which every other consideration is trifling and light, is our future life. How foolish, how short-sighted, indeed, must that creature be which can prefer the conveniences and accommodations of the present.”

I TOLD Mary as I caught her by the wash-house door, carrying a bundle of wet clothes. She did not seem surprised, nor was Stephany in the least astonished when I told her, too. Stephany thought that I had made a mistake in endowing my renunciation with a mystical beauty which did not really exist, and that one should enter a nunnery only with cold reason and plain commonsense. Mary, of course, did not agree with that, but hoped that some day I would return and tell them how I had found life outside after the peace

of the Mystic Rose. Would I promise that?

"Let's make a pact," said Stephany. "Promise to come back in twenty years."

I shall always remember that scene; the three of us solemnly shaking hands behind the wash-house door, and a number of sweet, high-pitched voices suddenly breaking out in a sonorous chant above us in the music room. It echoed in the quadrangle: "Domine, Domine, exaudi vocem meam." Then came the hours of silence, and I went up into my cell and fished out my diary from underneath the bed and put it in my pocket. Alas, my coat and skirt had gone. Given to the poor, I think. Possibly our clothes were kept for such emergencies as these, but I did not care to ask.

Then came the time for Rosary and Benediction. I shall always remember Sister Gabriella's high, cracked voice, as she called out for us to hurry as the church bells were ringing their last slow peals, and Sister Victoria kneeling at my side, reading audibly from her *Emmanuel*, which she held almost at arm's length. Poor soul, she was in dire need of glasses. She would never get them, though; there was no need for glasses in the kitchen. Stephany, who knelt on my right, felt for my hand, and squeezed it until it hurt, while the congregation prayed: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and in the hour of our death."



It suddenly seemed fantastic, my kneeling there, still, even now, carried away by the rhythmic humming of eighty women praying, by the romantic unreality of a religious life, by that curious indescribable quality of mass action, mass emotion, and by the undeniable beauty and sadness of an impossible ideal.

I was kneeling in the back row, and from there I easily recognized every one kneeling in front of me, muffled though the sisters were, with hoods reaching down to their eyebrows and covering the contours of their cheeks. There were the holy ones whom I loved, the timid ones, the shy ones; and there were the managing ones, always less holy, less sensitive; and there were the comfortable ones, the portly ones, like Sister Victoria at my side. I loved them, too. There were the lean and ascetic ones, of whom it was said that they had "brains," whom no one really cared for very much.

Few of them were now of this earth at all, yet it was difficult to imagine what would, in time, be left of them to "pass on" into eternity. So many seemed mere wintry shadows of their former selves.

Then Father Anthony elevated the jeweled monstrance, and Sister Pelagia rang the bell, "ting-a-ling," and as we all bent low Stephany squeezed my hand once more. In it I felt a piece of paper, which I carefully pushed into my enormous pocket, which hung

heavily between the folds of my skirt. At last we rose stiffly, as we always did after a day's hard work, and sang "Tantum ergo pretiosus," our favourite tune. As every one trooped out slowly, the shadows grew deeper in the convent garden, and the clock struck eight. There seemed no meaning now in anything, except in the passing of an autumn day. The windows of the convent were wide open, and I heard, we all heard, Sister Anastasia's voice travelling across the compound, calling: "Jesus! Jesus!"

But we had not finished with the day. Gathering in the dining-hall we knelt on the floor and prayed once more. Heaven knew why. But we always did. This was a religious life. Words, words, words, becoming meaningless with senseless repetition. And then, to bed. One more night. It was only then that I really prayed. From my heart, I mean. I was pleading for forgiveness.

The following day I spent nursing Sister Elisabeth, whose father had wanted to fetch her away in the previous summer. She, too, was coughing up her lungs. I was on duty in her sick-room before dawn, and I was holding up her head when Father Anthony brought her the Lord and the clock struck six. I was sitting mostly by her side right through the day, mending linen with invisible stitches. Once Sister Hedwig

called to take her temperature, and later a doctor arrived from Benwyl, a cold, indifferent-looking man of middle age, whose mind appeared to be elsewhere; on "temporal" things, not on the "eternal," as that of his patients. But perhaps I misjudged the man and he knew that there was not much he could do to change conditions. In half an hour I should be released from duty, go to Benediction for the last time, and then . . . home. But not to the heavenly home which was the only meaning of the word within these walls!

I shall always see the church as it was that autumn night, when the candles were blown out and the ceremony was over, and I had for the last time looked into Stephany's eyes, while the thick beams of incense radiated from the red oil lamp over the altar. Sister Pelagia and I locked the church from the inside. Sister Pelagia turned out the gas, and then we were in darkness. She went ahead into the sacristy, through the private chapel, where two nuns were kneeling, out into the hall, and then to bed.

I, of course, remained behind. No one seemed to miss me. I should, I calculated, have eight hours to wait in church until I could reasonably walk out onto the road to Benwyl to catch the early morning train. I should have liked to say good-bye to Sister Victoria, the dear, jovial soul. No, I mused, as I sat upon a bench

in darkness, I was not going to be afraid of life; and I was going to enjoy the sensation of eating fruit once more, of a full hot bath, and a change of clothing. Simple things in themselves, these really were, and I could only now properly appreciate them.

Time went very slowly, and I was getting cold. Queer noises came from the organ loft, and also from the belfry. It was the rats, letting themselves drop from rails and banisters. But I was used to rats. It was foolish though, I thought, to have remained in church like this. I should have done as Cornelia did, gone to bed until three o'clock, and walked out of the front door. But that would have been more risky.

Through the painted windows I could see that already all the lights were out in the dormitories. But the moon shone brightly now, and made faint patches of red and yellow on the whitewashed wall and the corner of the altar cloth. I was feeling sleepy, and lay down on a bench, but it was no good. Again my mind began to work. I was mortally afraid of God. That was the outcome of two years of religious teaching. But was that reasonable? Did He really care? I was inclined to doubt it just a little.

I remembered Father Anthony's words which he had spoken to us on Sunday during Mass: "Love not the world, nor the things that are of the world; if any

man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him." Was it, I wondered, the voice of my conscience that made me remember these quotations? Was it an answer to my prayers? Heaven, if I only knew! Ah, why did I care? Was there not the very smell of mortality in all this negation? And I wanted life, no possessions, but life.

My hip began to ache as I lay on the hard wood, and I sat up again and shivered. It was only eleven o'clock, and Father Anthony, whose study window was visible from where I sat, was evidently still up. Alone with Christ in the tabernacle, I tried once more to pray, but feeling uncertain if prayers from me would now be of any use, I gave it up. Like a miracle, the moon shone upon the golden crucifix above the altar. Was that, perhaps, a message? A warning, or a prophecy? Did it mean to say that Eden was lost to mankind, that it was a sick world we were living in, which would never be set right again without a series of terrible wars and sacrifices, and wherever we happened to be, inside or outside, it would always be the cross that was the true symbol of life, and that I was a fool to run away from one thing to another, and that I should probably know how happy I had been at the Mystic Rose once it was too late?

Once more I decided to try to sleep. I remembered

the hassock inside the confessional and fetched that out, placed it under my head, and for a little while I slept. When I awoke it was so dark that I could not see anything except the burning wick floating in oil above the altar. It was like a will-o'-the-wisp, hovering up there in mid-air.

I sat and waited. Once or twice I rose and swung my arms about and moved my feet, trying to keep warm. At the end of what I reckoned to be about two hours, the tower clock began to wheeze, and then struck, vibrating heavily through the empty church. It was midnight.

I decided to go up past the altar into the sacristy, where the priests' vestments hung, to find something there to keep me warm. It was darker still in there, and the door creaked slightly as I opened it. But after a while I could see much better, as the light from the chapel filtered through several cracks in the door, and I heard two nuns doing their nocturnal devotions, keeping their vigil through the night. "Heart of Jesus, atonement for our iniquities . . . Heart of Jesus, pierced by the lance, who takest away the sins of the world." Then, wrapped in a heavy cassock smelling faintly of snuff, I dozed off, once more sitting on the floor against the wall.

It struck two as I awakened again, and I heard two

nuns reciting the *Profundis*. They had just been changing places, and the same litany was reeled off from beginning to end as had been reeled off through centuries and would probably be reeled off through eternity: "Out of the depths I have cried to Thee, O Lord; Lord, hear my voice. . . . From the morning watch even until night; let Israel hope in the Lord." And then followed the litany of the saints. I knew every word of that. I had recited it so often myself. I shall always remember it as I heard it that night, for it was then that I almost changed my mind again.

"And let my cry come to Thee!" I repeated to myself again and again. But with a will I forced myself to return to reality, and I suddenly remembered that I had no money. It was no use at all trying to get away without. There were all the jewelled golden vessels of the convent locked in the glass case of the sacristy. There were the priests' vestments of such exquisite workmanship, laces so fine and woven with dreams of heaven, the value of which was unmeasurable in terms of cash. But there was no money; there was never any money in the convent. The reverend mother had her check-book in the office, but she never handled cash. Money, possessions, the curse of the world, I needed them now.

As I sat staring at the seam of light beneath the door, thinking of the world and its nasty ways, I saw several

cockroaches parading along the floor; and then I heard the gnawing of a hungry mouse near by. I could not, I felt, stay in there much longer. It was fuggy, too, smelling of damp and stale incense and camphor. So I pulled myself together, passed the altar once more, forgot to genuflect, and went back to bend my knee feeling a little guilty. Something stood between me, now, and God, and I knew not what. I had once left all for Him, or so I thought, and now my heart had cooled. It was Father Joseph who had said that one's heart could not be trusted in matters of religion.

A thousand and one things came to my mind as I sat there shivering. Sentences that had remained locked in my memory came to consciousness and mocked me. Fragments from the Proverbs, full of special meaning: "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes . . . but the eyes of a fool are in the ends of the earth"; or "The soul of the sluggard desires, and hath nothing." I grew ashamed of my indecision. "The soul of the sluggard," indeed! I grew impatient of myself, and rose to find the hassock and put it back where it belonged in the confessional.

Why did I linger, anyway? This was a poor way of making a break. I'd walk alone now, I said to myself. I'd rely on myself entirely. Many people in this modern world managed without the help of God.



Then I went out into the night. It had been quite easy to unlock the much-bolted door, even in the dark. Once more, though, I turned and genuflected and sprayed myself liberally with holy water, just for luck. I closed the door behind me.

Tears were now running down my face, but I did not care, since there was no one there to see them.

It was a black night. The moon was gone; a cold wind blew and almost took my breath away. I groped my way past the cemetery gates and down the flight of sandstone steps, through the spinney, from tree to tree, the plantain leaves, wet upon the ground, rustling beneath my feet. At last I reached the road. Barry, the dog, had not heard me. All was silent as death, and I wondered for a moment if it was myself standing there, or if I was disembodied, my spirit released. I was free at last, but I was conscious only of anxiety and knew no feeling of relief. I had a violent headache. I could even now sneak back and leave the proper way; openly, and with money for my train fare. But when I thought of Mother Superior and Sister Gabriella, stretched on their narrow beds, I felt I could not face them any more. It would have been much easier to face God, especially the God of Father Joseph.

As I went down the road I suddenly remembered Rosie, the barmaid of the "Adam and Eve," with

whom the cobbler was said to be living in sin; Rosie, who said that she would keep my eighteen francs I had parted with so light-heartedly, "in case I wanted it again."

It had seemed at the time a very worldly remark to make to a novice, and I had resented it a little. But then, how could I go and find her at this hour of the night? As I thought of Rosie, there came back to my mind again the smell of the little inn, new wine, stale beer, tobacco, and Rosie's cheap scent. I clearly saw Melanie's father and Stephany's unhappy mother. It did not seem very long ago.

Presently I reached the main road opposite the inn, and there, for a while, I stood and listened. The convent, the whole block of buildings, was very faintly outlined against the sky. Time seemed to be passing quicker now, every quarter of an hour striking in amazingly rapid succession.

I remembered quite well in which room Rosie had slept that night. It was a downstairs room, leading into the private bar where we had eaten our meals, the last good meals we had had. If only she still slept there. It would be easy enough to reach up and knock upon the window.

It was now half past three, and there was nothing else to do. So I walked up to the silent house, trod on

some dew-drenched dahlias, remembered that I had come out without my galoshes but that it did not matter now, pulled myself up a little on the window-sill, and gently knocked against the glass.

There was no answer. Three times I knocked, each time a little harder and more desperately, and still there was no answer. It was terrifying. What was I to do? And then, suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder, reaching out of the dark from above, and someone saying: "Deo gratias et Maria, it's a novice!"

Yes, it was Rosie, and I was saved. She knew me, too, almost at once. After what seemed to me hours, I found myself in her stuffy room and felt her comforting arm around me, and as I was trembling with cold, she persuaded me to slip into the huge untidy bed beside her.

"Take those awful clothes off," she said, "and that awful cap, and come along."

As I lay beside her she naturally wanted to talk. She seemed inordinately pleased at my escape, not guessing what it had really cost me. Almost in the twinkling of an eye she had removed the night's gloom.

"Come along," she said, pushing her eider-down well up to my neck. "You were right to leave. It's all vanities, I think, that kind of unnatural life. What you want to do," she went on, vigorously scratching her-

self, "is to live, and to get a nice boy, and to make love, the same as I do. That's real, anyway," she added, yawning. Didn't I know that? And as for making love, every one with any sense knew that was what we were meant for. That was wisdom. "Holy Philomena, you want to be happy and laugh." There was so much to laugh at in the world. There was time enough for religion when you had one foot in the grave. . . . She was still talking as I dozed off, at last, to sleep.

THE sky was turning grey as she stood before me with a cup of tea. "It's half past six," she said. "You'd better get up and dressed quickly, before the boss wakes up. He wouldn't have it said, the fool, that we'd harboured an escaping novice. Here," she added, "take these clothes, you can't go home in those!" She handed me a bright red cotton frock and a bright blue overcoat. "And here's your money back," she added, with a grin. "Dieu!" she sighed again and again. "I'm glad you are out!" as though I were a convict, an ex-lifer.

"Say, if you need a job," she went on, as I washed myself in her flowery basin, "maybe I can help you." She was relieved, however, when I told her that I still

had a home to go to. She reminded me, as I dressed again in the old black garb, that we were put into this world for a purpose. What, she would like to know, was the purpose in living in a nunnery? Could I honestly tell her? I did not like discussing such a question with Rosie in the early dawn, for my heart was still heavy within me, nor would she have properly understood.

I watched her comb her yellow hair as she stood in front of me in a cheap silk night-gown much too tight for her. I refused to take her overcoat, and placed it over her shoulders as she saw me out.

"Good-bye, Rosie," I said. "Thank you very much. I'd like to send you a little gift when I get home."

"Oh, but you are not to!" she cried. "It's your money. I kept it for you . . . you see, I always knew you would not stay." As she stood under the door, holding her coat around her, I wondered how on earth she could have known. I did not like her saying that. One hates to be summed up like that, so easily. We solemnly shook hands, and, as I crossed the bridge, the convent cocks were crowing, and my feelings were still rather mixed. I saw my dead self, all the dead selves of the inmates of the convent, walking with me in a kind of dream.

IN HER narrow cell Sister Elisabeth was opening her eyes as the light of dawn came creeping through the old lace curtain. Another day. How much longer, she sighed, until He would claim her? He loved her. She had never doubted that, for He had singled her out, and He had never ceased to chastise her. Had He not sent her this disease to test her strength? Through a gap in the curtain she also saw the morning star. "*O stella matutina,*" she sighed contentedly, "*salve porta.*" Then she slowly folded her wasted hands. Where was the novice, she wondered, who was to come and light the candles for the coming of the Lord? Yes, He was coming now, for there was a hush in the dormitory, people were hastily kneeling down, while Father Anthony, walking by, his head high, was carrying the Host to Sister Elisabeth. Where was that novice, she wondered vaguely once more, and then she soon forgot her.

IT WAS at that hour that I reached the station, just as the farmers of the district drove up with their milk-cans. Postal officials came along, whistling cheerfully. The world, it seemed, was theirs. Then the station-master unlocked the waiting-room, looking inquiringly in my direction, and said: "Good morning, miss, where to?" I bought my ticket, single fare, and was evidently regarded with suspicion. At last the train came rolling in, fussily cheerful, as if glad to be alive. I hurried into the hindmost third-class carriage, and I was alone. Milk-cans for Geneva were loaded in the luggage van behind, mail-bags and parcels were handed in, a couple of schoolboys entered in front, and the sky reddened with the sunrise, promising a lovely day.

At the last minute, when the train had already started to move, someone came running along the platform and entered my compartment. The whistle blew shrilly, and as I looked up into the face of my travelling companion I saw, to my horror, that it was Father Anthony.

"Good morning," he said, quite casually. Seating himself into the corner opposite, he took no further

notice, but found his breviary in his pocket, opened it in the middle, and started to pray. Then, as if a thought had struck him, he stopped, looked up, and said in his slow, cold voice: "Isn't it rather unusual for the reverend mother to send a novice on an errand . . . and so early . . . and all alone?"

I summoned up my courage, and decided to tell him the truth. "I am not going on an errand, father. I am going home."

"Going home?" he asked incredulously, replacing his book in the pocket of his soutane.

"Yes, home for good!"

"How's that?"

"I have run away. . . . I am very sorry."

"You mean to say, you mean me to understand, that you just ran away without a word to any one, walked out of the house . . . without the slightest compunction?" Father Anthony was genuinely shocked, and his mouth began to harden, as I had seen it harden before when preaching on the sins of the world.

"Why?" he wanted to know.

What right had he, I asked myself, to cross-question me now?

"I am sorry," I said. "I know it looks ungrateful, but it has not been easy. One does not run away without a struggle."



After all, what did he know of the state of my mind, or what had he cared when I had confessed my lack of proper faith?

"Ah! I see, the glamour has gone out of it!" he said icily, and I felt very small indeed. "You did not know there never was any glamour about a nunnery, did you? And that there was never meant to be?"

Then we were silent. There seemed already a tremendous distance between this priest, who should have known the state of my mind, and myself. It was as if I belonged to his world no more.

"Well," he said, "and what is your great ambition now?"

"I have no plans, father."

"No plans!"

The train approached another station, and he rose to leave. I wondered vaguely how it was that I had liked him so much before. There seemed something hard and conceited about him now. He looked at me once more, and said with a voice both impersonal and pompous: "Remember that those who reject the faith, who throw away its privileges, never, never know any peace. They are tortured and tantalized as long as they live. God have mercy on you." And then he was gone. It had sounded like a threat, and I suddenly felt awed once more by my stupendous decision. I had ceased

now to be a dream-walker, and unpleasant things would have to be faced. My immediate future rose before me. My flight from the Mystic Rose would be the talk of Hapsberg.

The day was sweltering. I saw young people picnicking; girls in cool dresses holding the hands of young men in the woods along the railway line. Then the carriage filled with perspiring soldiers of the 75th brigade, who removed their helmets, haversacks, and coats. Three of them began to play mouth-organs. They looked so healthy . . . no tuberculosis there!

The train crept along from valley to valley, and the soldiers began to sing. Presently, one of them pointed to my novice's garb, and then, for some strange, perverse reason, they felt inspired to sing one of their lewdest songs. The mouth-organs grew hysterical while I studied the landscape, fingering my crucifix in a superstitious hope that, by appealing to Jesus, I might cause the soldiers to withdraw their attention from me. But I was now in disgrace with Him. I had rejected His wonderful gift. Would I ever, I wondered, be able to ask a favour of God in the name of Christ? Would I now always have to speculate on things like these, and would I never know any peace?

Just as it struck eleven the train approached Hapsberg. It was Angelus time and the nuns would now be

kneeling down to pray. I did my best to forget them. My head was aching still, and I was hungry and feeling rather dizzy, too. Self-consciously, but quite unobserved, I left the little station, walked up High Street, where striped awnings shaded the shop windows on each side, and every one had drawn the blinds against the sun. The same old fountain in the market-place was belching peaty water through the mouths of mocking gargoyles. Marti's father climbed into his car outside his surgery, and drove off towards the hospital. That made me think of Melanie, also lying in hospital, so gentle, so content in her unquestioning acceptance of all that convent life implied.

I came safely past the post office, the emporium, and then the bank, without being seen, as their blinds were also drawn. Intense excitement filled my heart as I neared our home, and a thrill of great happiness ran through me as I opened the garden gate. The hall door stood wide open, but there seemed to be no one about. The kitchen fire was blazing high and there was a smell of baking. It seemed a tiny place to my eyes, that had grown used to the enormous rooms of the convent. And then my mother stood before me, with the light from the coloured panes above the stairs on her face and hair. She was crying with joy.

"You're not ill, are you?" she whispered anxiously in my ear.

When my father came home we sat down together, and I ate while they watched, too overcome themselves to eat.

"I suppose," said my father, "I had better ring them up at the Mystic Rose," and he went to the other room to telephone. He did not tell me what they said to him.

I had a bath, and when I glanced for the first time in two years into a mirror I was shocked. I was looking older and had gone very thin. But now all that would be changed, totally. A letter fell from my old black gown as I picked it up from the floor. It was Stephany's little note. "I wish you luck," it said. "I hope life will henceforth be calmer for you. Remember our pact, and 'Auf wiedersehen' in twenty years."

THE following morning I woke up as usual just as a streak of red showed in the east. The church bells were ringing to early Mass. I turned over in my bed and tried to go to sleep again, but my agitated conscience would not let me rest. It was but slowly that I returned

to the ordinary, everyday world from this weird dream existence, and I did not always find it easy. I was still preoccupied with my conscience, with my dwindling faith, with right and wrong. In the evening, when our old friends visited us, we argued a little for and against withdrawing from life.

"You can't do it," Dr. Flynn said, "without being a little crazy . . . and if you're not you soon will be."

"Ah, well," said Uncle Oscar, "you've chosen the world . . . or what you so fondly call life. May you find that it comes up to your expectation."

"She can always change her mind again," said Dr. Flynn.

As the evening advanced our guests began to think it very funny as they considered the aspects of my flight. I had never thought it funny. I could never forget the pathetic dream of a handful of women waiting all their lives for "God's Day," praying for His kingdom here on earth. It was a false dream, of course, at least I felt almost sure of that, but I was often grieved because it had not lasted.

IF THIS were a novel, and not a narrative in which the happenings are true, these reminiscences would now end. For John and I were married shortly after. Unknown to me, he had written several times to the Mystic Rose, but his letters had been retained in the office.

My diary, which lies before me now, keeps to the theme of convent life, and not that of love. But between one entry and another there lies a gap of twenty years. During that time I have learned as much of renunciation as seems usual in present-day life, and good for the life of any soul. I have, alas, learned to love many things "that are of the world"; home, children, and a few possessions; and with a mind exposed to many cares, I have frequently kept company with the gay and frivolous.

The nuns have long forgiven me, and once a year, Father Joseph, in the name of the Mystic Rose, has sent me a gaudy Christmas card, bearing the image of Our Lady, or the Three Kings, or the Child in the Manger, in blue and red and gold.

TWENTY years later, that is, only a few months ago, I packed my bags and went to keep my pact. It was a cold day in January, the earth was covered with snow as I arrived once more in Benwyl. The world was frozen over. Before I was conscious of my surroundings I had already arrived at the crest of the hill, half-way down towards the river. Far away I could see the outline of the convent. But my mind was in the past, the time when I came this way before, and the time I fled. I wondered what exactly I had meant to renounce and why I had wanted "peace" in the very spring of my life. It was not so clear to me now. I wondered if time had really stood still at the Mystic Rose, or if there had been many changes. Apart from Father Joseph's Christmas cards, I had never heard from any one.

As I was nearing the nearby village I grew a little anxious. I tried to recall my earlier feelings, my youthful ecstasy. It was impossible. It was also difficult to imagine any conversation I might be having there with any one. There was now nothing the nuns and I would have in common.

A gale blew down the lonely road, and flakes of snow were thinly drifting in the wind. My suitcase, as it had

done once before, was getting heavy. Everything looked as it had looked then; the same desolate road, and not a single additional house, and not a soul about. The day was drawing to a close as I passed the "Adam and Eve," which still bore the selfsame signboard. It had looked very faded then. It was almost invisible now, except for the snake, which was green, a color that had lasted well.

Slowly I opened the gates, which still creaked on their hinges. I walked into the silent garden, where all the beds were covered with twigs of pine. And then, a little nervously, I rang the bell. It was vesper time, and everybody would be sitting down to their half-pint cups of coffee. How sober I felt now though, compared to what I had been feeling then. I was rather sorry about that.

The door opened, and before me, instead of Sister Bonaventura, stood Sister Hedwig, looking very old. She knew me at once, although no one had expected me, and for a moment she held my hand against the rules. "My dear! My dear!" she kept repeating, as she gently closed the door behind me. She was quite toothless now, but her eyes were still as bright, as intelligent as ever. As I stood in the reception room the selfsame gilded French clock struck six. This was the ghostly hour of silence, and Sister Hedwig put her fingers to



her lips, scurried away in her felt slippers, and left me alone with my past.

How quickly, though, that past returned. It smelled the same. The same old statues stood round the walls, the Mystic Rose was still smiling sweetly down on me, and the clock was still ticking loudly. But there was another picture of another pope. Nothing else seemed to have changed. Nothing probably ever did or was meant to, except that one lived and died. Perhaps that was the beauty of it; no grave anxieties, no useless striving after worldly success.

Someone stood under the doorway, a woman with the outsize crucifix of office dangling on her chest, the present Mother Superior. She was an alarmingly pale woman, about my age, and she looked strangely familiar. Yes, there was no doubt, it was Stephany. And now she held out her hand to me in the manner of nuns, without pressing mine in return. She was a little distant, rather remote, as though she did not remember our youthful pact, but she called me Aloysia, as they all had done, after St. Aloysius. "Welcome home," she said, as though I had come to stay for good. For a while we both sat down. Stephany had never been an idle chatterer, but now there seemed nothing whatever to say.

She sat with her hands resting on her knees; very

thin, very white, not much changed, yet strangely different.

"You have not changed at all," she said to me kindly, glancing at my figure, my clothes, my hat. That made me feel distinctly worldly. Several nuns stood out in the passage and seemed to recognize me again, and although they looked demure, with their naked hands well tucked inside their sleeves, I felt that they were tremendously curious about me, for I had gone back into the world, and the question was, had I found it worth while? I had evidently come back to tell them now, or perhaps to nurse my wounds.

They were scattering now into the dining-room, and Stephany and I followed behind. Slowly, something of the old glamour came back to me as I sat with the nuns, over a hundred of them now, silently eating their dry bread. Shortly after prayers they were given permission to talk. This was exceptional, owing to my visit. They had always prayed for me, said the assistant mother, who was sitting on my left, a woman I did not know or remember. It had been "an uncertain kind of world" I had gone out into, said Stephany, had it not?

With them, things had remained the same, or very nearly so, she added; Sister Juliana had gone of course, passed on, so had Sister Elisabeth shortly after I had left, and so had Sister Anselma, Sister Anastasia, Sister

Adelheid, the reverend mother of my time, and several others. Looking round the table I found many familiar faces still there. There was Melanie, sitting exactly opposite, smiling at me in a tired kind of way, her eyes much duller though, her hands twitching all the time, as if unable to rest after twenty years of endless tasks. I learned later that, for no apparent reason she had never been allowed to teach at school.

The food, it seemed, was still the same old prison fare. All the drowsy days came back to me now, when I, too, had been sitting there, feeling sleepy, often too tired to eat.

The talking stopped. At the usual signal the habitual meal-time reading began. I recognized the old book of devotion, bound in red leather. A thin little voice came from a thin little woman. It spoke in praise of purity, it lauded chastity above all things, and then grew thinly wrathful about the awful sins of the flesh, calling upon Jesus that the nuns were His and He was theirs. Then her lips fell back into her toothless mouth, her piping little voice ceased, and with great dignity she left the pulpit. Her words hung coldly in the air until we were allowed to speak again. I sought Stephany's eyes, but there was no answer there. I doubted if she took the slightest notice of these meal-time sermons now. If she did she did not show it. She

had grown used to them, or perhaps indifferent or tolerant; or perhaps she thought them necessary for the young ones.

Then, for half an hour, those who remembered me best came to talk to me in the old reception room. Not much news, of course, had reached them from the outside world. World news was still read to them once a month, much diluted. The way they jumped to conclusions, however, was uncanny. Questions were asked hastily, for time was short. Was it true about the nunneries in Spain? Could one trust the German Government these days? Was it not better to die in the service of Christ, than, for instance, for foreign trade? Or democracy or Fascism, or whatever fleeting cause people died for? It was refreshing to realize that here, at least, was one place on earth where there was no nationality.

Above all, one of the sisters almost shrieked with wordly excitement, what did I think of the romance of the Duke of Windsor? Yes, they all wanted to know about that. Generous to a degree, they wanted everyone else to be happy, too, even though it was not in their way. Just as the conversation was at its loudest there was a hush, the folding doors were opened wide, and a nun was wheeled into the room, lying completely flat on an invalid chair. Her face was terribly emaci-

ated, her eyes sunken, and she had barely strength to speak.

"This," said one of the sisters, "is Sister Bernadette."

She slowly turned her head, and her eyes sought mine.

"How," she whispered, "is dear old England . . . and dear Queen Mary?"

It was not until then that I knew her. It was Mary. Mary grown completely helpless with tuberculosis of the bones. Her eyes lit up and a peaceful smile spread over her cadaverous face as I spoke to her in English. Was this the freckled girl that had stood before me naked in the sunlight, twenty years ago, after that forbidden bath? It seemed unbelievable. But our allotted half hour was up and the bells were ringing for Benediction, and Mary was wheeled out again back into the sanatorium, suddenly looking very flushed.

I was to sleep in the guest room above the flats of the priests, but first I joined the others in the church for Benediction. I remembered that nocturnal scene in the old church on the night of my departure. It seemed unreal now. Yet, as one of the strange young nuns began to sing, I felt myself carried away again, almost as completely as before.

It was the lament of the Virgin, and the nun sang it alone, with a clear, but thin, little voice as emotion-

less as a boy's: "Stabat Mater dolorosa Juxta crucem lacrymosa. . . . Quando corpus morietur, Fac ut animae donetur Paradisi gloria. Amen."

In silence we trooped out. This was indeed a privileged place for those who really belonged, and I felt a little out of it. None of them, I sensed it at once, not even Stephany, could be the same towards me again. It could not be expected. She took me silently to the steps of the guest house and handed me to another nun-housekeeper, another "Cerberus," equally as forbidding as the former one. Without another word we parted for the night.

Beneath a small electric bulb hung a crucifix on a rusty nail on the whitewashed wall of my little bedroom. On a chest of drawers, piled high one on top of the other, were several slightly mildewed books: the *Life of Ignatius of Loyola*, the lives of St. Francis of Assisi, of St. Aloysius, and of St. Philip Neri.

The bed was bitterly cold: no one had slept in there for years, the one-eyed nun had said. A hundred memories invaded my mind, and for once I seemed to hear the wings of Time. Going back into the past like this is a disturbing thing. I had seen many places since, had been a pilgrim often on the move, whereas they had done the same thing from day to day, from year to year. They had had no "future," as we fondly call our

fleeting years. How enviably free they had been, though, from the need of making a "living." It had, when I came to think of it, by no means been easy for us to come honestly by our daily bread. One had needed to be cold and hard, and even crafty. Then I thought of Mary, who had been lying on her back for seven years, who had done penance for heaven alone knew what. And then there was Melanie, the German girl, who, contrary to what one would have expected, looked neurotic, whose eyes had lost that girlish wonder, and, with it, some of their innocence.

All the windows in the quadrangle were in darkness now, and still I could not get to sleep. The white "flood-lit" Christ on the ebony cross was not conducive to sleep, and for some time I groped about in the dark searching for the switch, and turned it out. Slowly I got warmer, and then I was awakened by the bells as they were ringing for early Mass. Even now I found it still completely fascinating to see all the nuns float soundlessly down the aisles, and to hear a young Mussolini of a priest, his fine, big head thrown back, with a Caruso-like voice, sing in the gloom: "Gloria in excelsis Deo!" All the untold longings of humanity seemed to have crept into his powerful voice. Father Anthony had left some years ago, and there was now this young priest, Father Ignatius, blue-chinned and

quite unemotional, except when he sang.

It was not easy, being a guest in a nunnery. With the rest of them I trooped into the dining-hall for breakfast, coffee again, of course, and bread. After that, I was at a loose end for the rest of the day. Stephany was busy, everyone was busy. A young nun was practising on the organ, and when I spoke to her she began to talk of her home and her parents, but soon broke off, probably realizing that the past was gone and done with.

Then I met Alfonso, the baker, who remembered me, too. No, he said, he had never married. Like the priest, he had remained wedded to his profession. Ah, yes, he remembered me well! Such incidents as there had been that year, he thought, had argued, in his opinion, in favor of less binding vows. How right, he thought, Sister Cornelia had been to go when she found that to remain was beyond her. She was now the mother of two fine sons. There was the question of vows, of course, he mused. It seemed to him negligible from the point of view of eternity. Then he pointed to his arms, which were covered with a kind of eczema. That, he said, came from working with inferior flour. He did not eat it, their bread, himself, but they, bless them, they never complained. He turned and stared up and down the passage, and then he looked at me and



said: "It's a funny thing, I've worked under six different Superiors in my time and, you wouldn't believe me, each has been trying to surpass the others with a better balance-sheet." Then Alfonso bent down to pick up his sour-smelling bag of flour, and then, once more, he stopped to think. There would be a time, he mused, and not so far off if I asked him, when men would get together and create a new and better world. Then there would be no further need for nunneries, because life would be more like a gift than it was now, life would be good for everyone. "It won't be long," he said. I was to mark his words.

Shortly before dinner I was introduced to Father Ignatius, who promptly began talking politics. He thought it was up to England to create some order in this chaos of the world. He did not tell me how, and we left it at that. He seemed convinced, though, that England was still feared enough to take the lead.

"Perhaps," said gentle Father Joseph, who was approaching eighty, "a miracle will happen yet."

Father Ignatius merely smiled. He did not believe in miracles in world affairs.

I dined alone with Stephany in the guest room, and we had some veal and beetroot. This was the room where sad and weeping mothers took leave for ever of their daughters, or sometimes came to inquire after

them, unable to see them. Stephany sat opposite me on a high-backed chair, looking thin and cold, and strangely deadened. What had happened to Stephany? I wondered. She was still beautiful, even though her eyes, which seemed to have grown darker, expressed nothing at all. Sentiment made me want to talk of the past, willy-nilly. I wanted to walk the old ways again, I said to Stephany, to look at my old cell, and to see who was in it now, and if the old floor-board was still loose where I had hidden my diary. In fact, I wanted to be made a young girl again. But it was clear that Stephany did not. Unlike Melanie, or myself, there was nothing about Stephany's figure that might have drooped or expressed her moods. Her habit, with its many folds, covered a thin and very upright figure. Stephany was forty years of age. She had, I realized, become shrewd, industrious, and fired with the ambition to organize. She had no intimates. The novices were afraid of her. It was almost as though she had become an understudy to Sister Adelheid, the old Superior. Socially, she was a very correct Mother Superior, and it was clear to me that she had long forgotten our childish pact. She was not interested in my life at all. Instead of this she talked only of the rewards of their industry, the income derived from the school, and of last autumn's crop of apples, and the evident

blessing the Lord had given her enterprise.

"Let me show you the improvements I have made," she said after our meal, and then she showed me round. Since she had been honoured with the office a dentist called at the Mystic Rose four times a year; and there was a tiny geyser installed in each dormitory, where water could be heated if anyone wanted to wash her feet and hair. No, there were no bathrooms yet, and no frequent bathing. It was far too expensive, requiring at least a ton of coal each time. "And here," she said, as we came to the kitchen, "I have introduced the most ingenious cherry-stoning machine. We turn out a hundred kilos of cherry jam a day and sell it at a franc the jar."

In some inexplicable way Stephany kept me at arm's length; there was a barrier between us and we both felt ill at ease. Stephany, who had once been so critical, so lonely, had grown accustomed, as one is, of course, bound to do, and she looked the kind of woman who has achieved all she wanted in the world. She was friendly enough and asked me if I remembered how vivid the hillside had looked with yellow gorse in those far-off days before the convent had bought that stretch of land from their Protestant neighbours. Since then, she added proudly, it had been used for more profitable produce. All the land as far as the eye could see,

right down to the lake, now belonged to the Mystic Rose. Stephany seemed to glow with the convent's worldly achievements. It would have shocked her, I mused, provident woman that she now was, had she known how we, John and I, had more than once set out without trade, knowledge, or profession, to find a living here and there. We, I thought, had evidently trusted providence more than she.

Looking out upon the rolling pasture land, surrounded with woods and vineyards buried deep in snow, and then turning back to the room where Stephany worked, with its galleries of saints along the walls, her features grown hard, shrewd, and humourless, I asked myself if, in the face of bygone hardships, I had any possible regrets at having exchanged a safe existence for a precarious one? After all, the Mystic Rose was a kind of refuge from the world, and would-be nuns were always plentiful. It all depended in the end on which one considered more frightening, life in the raw, or a sheltered but communal life. Anyway, I suddenly longed to be gone.

"Would you care to come upstairs with me," she asked, "to see those who are sick?" So I followed her up to the old familiar sanatorium. A nun was scrubbing the thick cork lino, her habit pinned up above a purple underskirt. At one end of the sick-room lay a

very old nun, terribly emaciated, her yellow face a mass of hideous wrinkles. Her eyes were furtively darting here and there. "That," said Stephany with a voice as cold as ice, "is your old novice mistress, Sister Gabriella." I felt at once that they were still hostile to each other.

Then I found Mary again. She lay behind a screen fast asleep. Sister Victoria was also there, her affectionate heart barely functioning now. She found it difficult to speak. This "worldly" nun had influenced me more than she would ever know, although she was not what the others called a "mystic." She remembered me; holding out her hand to me, muttering something which I could not understand. A novice, sitting by the door mending linen caps which nuns wore when in bed, was crying gently to herself, almost happily, one would have guessed. No one took the slightest notice.

The ruby- and diamond-studded crucifix stood ready on a commode near by, alongside a tin basin, wherein lay a sodden sponge. Someone was apparently soon going to leave this world. One did not die with one's face to the wall, or to the sky, at the Mystic Rose, but one gazed upon a cross . . . and a ruby as red as the blood of Christ.

Later, I met Sister Bonaventura, who looked hardly altered at all. She was now in charge of the pharmacy,

doling out those simple, and mostly quite useless, remedies. Gone, apparently, was her old gaiety now. She looked sobered, and seemed no more moved to easy laughter. She made a few courteous interrogative remarks to me: "Your husband, is he tall? . . . and fair? . . . and kind? What is his occupation? And your daughters, are they pretty, are they good?" Behind her, sitting in the new chair, the "confessional," which was now used alternately by the visiting dentist and Father Ignatius, sat Sister Pelagia, sorting out curative herbs which lay in her lap. She was resting at last from her outdoor labours, crippled with rheumatism. She looked almost a hundred, but she was said to be just gone sixty-five.

In the guest-room I met Melanie polishing the chairs beneath the "Mystic Rose." She was not now the placid, simple German girl she had once been. I thought her a little mad. One felt, somehow, that a stretch in the outside world would probably have saved her from her evident breakdown. The implicit faith she had had years ago seemed to have failed her, and she looked infinitely solitary and defenceless. She was lonely.

"I have often thought of you," she said. "The way you broke away. . . . What about worldly love?" she wanted to know a little shyly. Had it been worth

while? Had I any regrets? She had thought of me many times . . . wondering. They all had. There was really no answer to her mute and searching questions, and she knew that as well as I. She rose from her knees, and steadied herself against the wall behind her. It was getting dark, and a band of ravens congregated on the tree-tops in the spinney where, years ago, a nightingale used to sing and the cobbler used to play his piccolo. "Listen," one or other of the novices used to say, "a nightingale!" and tears would fill our eyes.

"Yes," mused Melanie, "I have often thought of you; how you went before you had lost the ability to pray. It happens, you know, sometimes. . . . And when it does," she sighed, "it's awful." It had gone on for three years now. . . . She could not even make a mental picture of God or of Christ, since she had lost the power to believe in a personal kind of God. She did not know how it happened, or how she could have prevented it. It was as though she were abandoned, cast out into the darkness; and what was troubling her was that now she felt no emotion at all, except fear.

I thought that a course of systematic meditation might have been good for Melanie, but at the Mystic Rose there was no time to meditate.

"Almost everyone," I said, "has experienced times when there seems nowhere to look for comfort, but

they have always passed." Then I let go of her hand and she smiled a little. The bells were ringing now, and she had to run. The hurry of their daily, plentiful tasks was, in a way, a blessing. It meant putting aside again and again what was left of themselves.

The little church was still the same; the starry ceiling, sickly St. Joseph, the baby-like Virgin, the fret-work, and the artificial roses. How cold it was. I could detect no heating anywhere.

After Benediction there was nothing more to do except to go to bed. And it was only eight o'clock. For a little while I slipped into the kitchen to get warm, and presently one of the nuns brought me a creaking wicker chair and a cup of soup. Tramp soup, still bubbling on the hob. It seemed a little better than it used to be. The cobbles in the courtyard were slippery with ice as I went across to the grim-looking guest house to bed. On the oil-cloth-covered table in my room stood a white enamel pitcher filled with water. It was completely frozen. There was no carpet, and no mirror either, but as I opened the window I saw the moon rise over a forest of pines, and, below me, leaning from his study window, Father Ignatius secretly smoking a pipe. Smoking being taboo among priests on the Continent, and especially in nunneries, he had to do it where no smell could linger.



When I awoke at dawn I saw Father Ignatius taking the Lord over to the sisters in the sanatorium. Suddenly, from the stable yard, the death-cry of a cockerel pierced the tranquillity and scattered the early morning prayers. Two young nuns were cutting its throat, slowly, inefficiently. These chickens were not, as one might have guessed, to be cooked for the sisters and served in the sick-room, but for the dinner of the priests.

When I went to see Mary after breakfast I found the priests still in charge of her cell. The sun had just risen but did not, as yet, strike across the wall. It was a strange hour of the day for visiting the sick; far too early. There was a smell of burning candles and the air was thick with incense. From behind the screen where Mary lay I heard Father Ignatius administering the last rites, murmuring: "*Miseratus tui omnipotens Deus et dissimulans peccatis tuis perducatur te ad vitam aeternam.*"

All was silent after that, and presently he stepped out with his head bowed. Behind him walked two sisters, carrying the candles and a covered tray, their heads also bowed. Then came another carrying the heavy golden crucifix. I felt out of place and almost wished I had not come, but no one seemed to mind my presence there. I had once been one of them; that was

enough, or very nearly so. How cold it was in the huge room, how inadequate the antiquated central heating.

I felt that I had to see Mary once more, and then I should depart. As I passed Sister Victoria's cell I heard the voice of Father Ignatius once more, as he held the ciborium above her much-raised pillow. "Corpus Domine nostri Jesu Christi . . . in vitam aeternam. Amen." And then, as he stepped out at last to go and I was waiting for him to pass me, I leaned against a painted chest, on which, in carved lettering, it said: "Marietta Motta, Paris-Milan." What had happened to Marietta? I wondered now, for I had not seen her yet. Beautiful Marietta, the girl with the unusually large dowry, whose field was buried now in snow; Marietta, the much favoured one. I went across to the window while I waited to be fetched, and, as it was completely frosted over, I opened it and looked out over the wintry garden where I used to gather lilies of the valley and masses of forget-me-nots for the Virgin's altar. It looked beautiful even so, in white. Leading down towards the grotto, the favourite haunt of Cornelia, were the footprints of a nun. Otherwise, the snow was completely undisturbed.

"If you wish to see Sister Bernadette," said a novice at my side, "you can come now." Sister Bernadette, or rather Mary, was lying in a snow-white bed with

her eyes closed. She seemed to be waiting. They all seemed to be waiting. "That chicken," she whispered suddenly, with a faint smile, referring to the farmyard cry at dawn. It had made her feel very queer. The trouble was, she smiled, the sisters were too tender-hearted. "Please," she whispered, "sit with me awhile!" and then, for a long time, she closed her eyes again. There was no chair in her cubicle and her bed was very high, so I squatted on the window-sill. "I expect you know that they have anointed me? I shall soon be going now. I'm glad that you came."

The still early sunshine illuminated the white-washed wall behind her, and her pathetic-looking, dilapidated breviary, the gilt-edged book of devotion. Once more she smiled. "Remember our pact?" she said, and then later, and, I thought, a little guiltily: "And our bath?"

"Of course," I said; "that's why I came." It was nice to know that now, looking back upon her life from the exit, she no longer regarded that episode as a grievous sin.

"And you?" she wanted to know. "Are you happy with your family? Will you," she then begged, "when you get back to England, send me a handful of earth! Silly, isn't it?" Yes, and there was something else. She wanted me to go and see her father who lived in Lon-

don. "Tell him I was very happy, very happy indeed."

How silent it was now in the lumbering old house which, I noticed, was still infested with rats. Watching Mary lying there and longing to be gone, I realized what my life would have been had I remained at the Mystic Rose, and I began to feel unreasonably sorry for that other self, that very young self I had once been.

I sat a long time at the foot of Mary's bed, remembering those summer afternoons, Mary always running, whereas others walked sedately, her face covered with freckles; and I mused how strange it was that, even in a nunnery at the hour of one's death, one's mind should wander back to one's native land. All kinds of thoughts went through my mind: the unimportance of one's immediate past compared to the landscapes of one's childhood, one's tolerance at the hour of one's death compared to one's intolerance when in health.

Then, in her half-sleep, Mary began to talk. "Stella matutina," she sighed. "Salve porta . . . take away . . . In manus Tuas. . . . Te lucis ante terminum . . . oh . . . take me . . . once more across . . . the downs . . ." I tiptoed to the dividing screen.

"Good-bye, Mary," I whispered, but she did not hear me.

"A little delirious," said the young nun who was

in charge, and was now busy polishing the floor with beeswax, as I used to do.

One of the sick nuns near by was praying loudly. "Curb Thou . . ." she said, "our raging enemy . . . that we . . . in chaste repose may lie."

As I passed the bed of Sister Gabriella there was a glance of friendly recognition, and suddenly her wrinkled, jaundiced face broke into a crooked smile. It was the first time I had ever seen her smile. Sister Victoria, too, smiled as I looked into her open cell, not without a roguish twinkle in her eyes. I wanted to kiss them all good-bye, but that was against the rules, of course. Instead, I waved my hand. "Till I see you again," she said, pointing her finger to the sky.

For the last time I had dinner alone with Stephany. The table was laid for two in the airy office. There were the same heavy velvet curtains, the same Turkish rugs, a little worn, the same faded photographs of popes and other dignitaries. There was also a new painting, entitled "The Sorrowing of Mary," underneath which was an inscription: "In memory of my daughter Marietta, who gave her soul to God on January the fourth, 1937. R.I.P."

Stephany and I had but little to say to each other. Years of passive obedience had deadened the once so proud and passionate woman. A little suspiciously her

eyes sought mine, as though she wanted to be convinced of my good faith.

"I remember," she said with a ghost of a smile, as she saw me scan her bookshelf, a single shelf above her desk, "you always advocated books for nuns, but, as you see, we have not increased our library by a single volume." Her voice flickered coldly upon the air as she went on: "You see, we have no need of books. . . . But then, you had never really grasped the meaning of renunciation, had you?" Probably I had not. It was difficult to tell. "Besides," she went on, as though she wanted me to understand their point of view a little better, "what we are here for is to work and pray. As for books of meditation, most of them are superfluous. . . . Besides, everyone knows that women have not got it in them to become mystics."

After dinner I called on Father Joseph, who was in his study resting after a heavy meal. He took pity on me and made room for me opposite the fire. I had often wondered what had been Father Joseph's dream when he came to rest in this corner of the world. Whatever it was, he seemed to have forgotten it. If it had been a simple dream of peace he had achieved it now. I remembered him as I had known him formerly, living on terms of constant mutual distrust with some of the leading nuns. They could hurt him no more now.

They were all dead, prematurely most of them. It had been a life of work for them. They had dug and hoed, had reaped and sown, and carried heavy burdens, whereas he and the rest of the priests had prayed and contemplated. It was so quiet in his study as we remained sitting contentedly by the fire without speaking. He looked doleful enough, in his black gown and exaggerated meekness; but presently he rose, opened a cupboard behind his bookshelf, and brought forth a bottle of local wine and two glasses.

"Here!" he said, as he handed me mine. "Here goes for Eve and her apple." And then he seemed overcome with senile mirth as he remembered the time when, he said, I had lost my chance of saintship by eating half an apple, "not knowing yet that convent walls had eyes." He had thought that very funny, even then. And, as I contemplated Father Joseph and mused on how ideals were scattered on the way as one grew older, I felt a sudden and tremendous longing to be gone, an ache almost, for my own warm little world. Like a child, I wanted to go home.

I left him sitting once more immersed in his vague reverie, his only friend on earth himself.

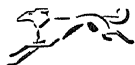
"Come again some day," said Stephany, without taking her hands from inside her vast sleeves. And then, by the iron gate, I looked back once more. She was

still standing in the porch, and I stopped and waved my hand to her. She, too, lifted her hand a little and gravely bowed her head. Someone else waved from an upstairs window; and standing behind me, coming from his house, was the young and zealous Father Ignatius. He did not seem to see me. In his hand he had a jar of holy water, for he was on his way to bless the dormitory again, as I, who was not dedicated, had by my very presence unknowingly defiled it.

A thrill of happiness ran through my heart as I walked back to Benwyl in the snow, back into the outside world, "into a weary and sad old world," according to the nuns, a "vale of tears." The sun was setting, and before me shone the lake, and I heard the distant siren of the ancient ferry-boat on its outward crossing. It seemed a bright, new world to me.



## A NOTE ON THE TYPE



This book was set on the Linotype in "Baskerville," a facsimile of the type designed by John Baskerville, Birmingham, England, in 1754. The original Baskerville type was one of the forerunners of the "modern" style of type faces. The Linotype copy was cut under the supervision of George W. Jones of London.

The book was composed, printed, and bound by *H. Wolff*, New York. The paper was manufactured by *S. D. Warren Co.*, Boston. The label is adapted from original designs by *W. A. Dwiggins*.







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